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MAY I SAY at the outset that it is as an observer, and not as a practitioner of history, that I have consented to appear on this program? As one who has been privileged to enjoy the society of historians and the benefits of their work, I am glad of this opportunity to express appreciation of what they have done, and to contribute however inadequately to the observance of this occasion. This is the Burlington's ninetieth year also, for it was in 1849 that the first link of our system was chartered. But you really have the advantage, for whereas it took us railroaders a whole year to begin running trains, your society was under full steam the moment it was incorporated.

All of you know that the railways have had a great deal to do with developing summer travel to the West. While considering this subject some twenty years ago my attention was called to a picture of the observation car of a transcontinental train published in the magazine *Life*. It showed an open platform filled with stylishly dressed women and men. They were exclaiming on how singularly dreary and uninteresting the country was, but in shadowy outlines, above the train and around it, were pictured the various types of life which had once roamed those prairies—Indians, buffaloes, grizzly bears, deer, antelope—and then

¹An address presented at the St. Paul Athletic Club on October 20, 1939, the ninetieth anniversary of the incorporation of the Minnesota Historical Society, at a luncheon arranged in celebration of the event by the St. Paul Association of Commerce. *Ed.*

the trek of civilization, explorers, missionaries, trappers, traders, hunters, and pioneers. This picture confirmed an idea some of us had that if travelers could be told even a little of the history of the plains country in which they spend a day en route to their western vacations, their pleasure and satisfaction in the journey would be greatly enhanced and thus more of them would be encouraged to visit the Northwest. Having decided to try putting the idea into practice, we quickly learned that the information which might appeal to passengers was available chiefly in the collections of the various state historical societies. We also found that the services of staffs of trained historians were cheerfully at the command of anyone who desired to use them. Through the personnel of such staffs were formed many of my contacts with sources of Northwest history.

This is the ninetieth birthday of the Minnesota Historical Society. In considering its growth and later achievements, let us look briefly at its beginnings and the setting in which they transpired. Minnesota Territory had just been organized; the first legislature, assembled on September 3, 1849, had before it the tremendous task of designing and manufacturing the body of law for the government of the new territory. In addressing this very first session, Governor Alexander Ramsey in his opening speech said: "The preservation by a community, of materials for the composition of its history, when a future time shall require it to be written, is a task not without its uses; and when early commenced, easily accomplished." The governor then added that one of the most valuable sources of history is the contemporary newspaper, and he therefore specifically recommended that the territorial secretary or librarian be authorized to subscribe for, and to keep in durable form, each and every newspaper that might be published in the territory.

Apparently his suggestion fell on receptive ears, for by

October 20 an act was passed by this busy legislature, and signed by the governor, to incorporate the Minnesota Historical Society. The new association showed in the first article of its constitution that it intended to carry out the governor's recommendation, for it declared that "its primary object shall be the collection and preservation of a Library . . . and other matters and things connected with, and calculated to illustrate and perpetuate the history and settlement of said Territory." The fundamental policies of the society implied in this broad declaration have not been changed since 1849.

Equally as important as its purpose, was the influential group of people behind the movement. After ninety years it seems appropriate to review the list of organizers. Who were they, and why were they interested in the organization of an institution to preserve the record of development of a new state from a raw wilderness?

They were Charles K. Smith, secretary of the territory; David Olmsted, president of the territorial legislature; Henry H. Sibley, fur trader, sportsman, social and political leader, and at the time delegate to Congress from Minnesota; Aaron Goodrich, chief justice of the territorial supreme court; David Cooper and Bradley B. Meeker, associate justices of the same court; Alexander M. Mitchell, United States marshal of Minnesota; Dr. Thomas R. Potts, pioneer St. Paul physician; Justus C. Ramsey, a brother of Governor Ramsey; Henry M. Rice, like Sibley, a prominent fur trader; Franklin Steele, sutler at Fort Snelling and one of the first to develop water power at the Falls of St. Anthony; Charles W. W. Borup, educated as a physician in his native Denmark, long a trader in the Minnesota country, and a pioneer St. Paul banker; David B. Loomis, an early Stillwater lumberman and a member of the territorial council; Morton S. Wilkinson, said to have been the first practicing attorney in Minnesota; Lorenzo A. Babcock, attorney general of Minnesota Territory; Henry Jackson, St. Paul

storekeeper and fur trader, first justice of the peace and first postmaster of the frontier river town, and a member of the territorial legislature; William H. Forbes, a trader for the American Fur Company and a member of the territorial legislature; William D. Phillips, first district attorney of Ramsey County; and Martin McLeod, trader in the Minnesota Valley from 1837 and a member of the territorial council.

Of these nineteen men, the vast majority had enjoyed advantages of education unusual in their day. Nine were lawyers and two were physicians. Meeker and Mitchell were Yale men; Dr. Potts was a graduate of the medical school of the University of Pennsylvania. Several, including Sibley, had received good classical educations before leaving their former homes for the frontier West.

This list includes the names of men prominent both in the territory and the state. Sibley served as the first governor of the state, as general and commander of the troops that suppressed the Sioux after the outbreak of 1862, and in other capacities too numerous to mention here. Olmsted became editor of the *Minnesota Democrat*, an early St. Paul paper, and he served as mayor of St. Paul in 1854. Rice had a distinguished career as delegate in Congress from 1853 to 1857, and as United States Senator from 1858 to 1863. Another future United States Senator was Wilkinson, who served also as a Congressman and state senator. As a member of the territorial council, Martin McLeod was author of the bill that laid the foundations for Minnesota's school system.

The incorporators left their marks upon the map of Minnesota. No fewer than seven Minnesota counties—Olmsted, Sibley, Meeker, Rice, Steele, Jackson, and McLeod—are named for organizers of the Minnesota Historical Society, and an eighth, Ramsey, commemorates its first president. A village in Norman County bears the name of Borup. St. Paul streets are named for Sibley,

Goodrich, Rice, Jackson, Forbes, and Ramsey; and in Minneapolis, Franklin Steele Square perpetuates the name of Steele.

The one hundred and thirty-three charter members of the society, too, included names of men who were at the time, or who later became, leaders in the business, political, religious, and educational affairs of the territory. Appropriately, Governor Ramsey was chosen the first president, and he held that office for fifteen years. In large measure he must be thanked for the fact that the Minnesota Historical Society has the "distinction of following civil organization more quickly than any other" institution of its kind in America.

What account has the society to give of its accomplishments in these past ninety years?

It has accumulated a library of nearly two hundred thousand books, pamphlets, and newspaper volumes, including the most comprehensive collection in existence of materials relating to the history of Minnesota and one of the largest collections of genealogical and biographical publications in the United States. It is strong in the general field of Americana and in materials relating to the Scandinavian elements in America. By following Governor Ramsey's advice and preserving "a copy of each and every newspaper" as published, the society has built up a collection of nearly twenty thousand volumes of newspapers, most of them Minnesota papers, which go back to the first number of the *Minnesota Pioneer* published on April 28, 1849, and continue through to the present.

In its manuscript division the society has assembled more than five thousand collections of papers, the collections ranging in size from a single item to tens of thousands of documents. The bulk of the collections are made up of letters, diaries, and other documents left by men and women who played some part, great or small, in the making of Minnesota—such men as Ramsey, Sibley, Steele, McLeod,

Neill, Knute Nelson, Donnelly, Dr. Folwell, Governor Lind, Congressman Charles A. Lindbergh, to mention a few of the more notable, and a host of men and women who, though little known, have left in their papers records illuminating nearly every aspect of the history of Minnesota. Records of churches, clubs, schools, business concerns, and similar organizations, and film-slide copies of manuscripts of Minnesota interest that are owned by other institutions may also be found in the society's collections.

The society has also built up a large museum, in which are displayed articles that visualize the external conditions of life in Minnesota's past. Not the least in importance of the museum collections are its sixty-five thousand pictures.

The society has always regarded the dissemination of Minnesota history among the people of the state as an important phase of its work. Between 1850 and 1920 seventeen volumes of *Collections* were published, which included, for the most part, papers on various aspects of Minnesota history written by Minnesotans. Between 1921 and 1930 Dr. Folwell's four-volume *History of Minnesota*, which is considered one of the best of the state histories, was published. In 1932 was inaugurated a series of *Narratives and Documents*, the third volume of which, *Minnesota Farmers' Diaries*, appears from the press today as the society's ninetieth anniversary volume. The society's quarterly magazine, MINNESOTA HISTORY, will complete its twentieth volume with the December, 1939, issue. A series of *Special Bulletins*, a two-volume history of *Minnesota in the War with Germany*, a *Check List of Minnesota Public Documents*, and a monthly clip-sheet for newspapers, the *Minnesota Historical News*, are other publications of the society.

In the recording and publishing of manuscripts and records, it is the part of the scholar to discriminate between what is unimportant and of mere passing value and that which is influential in shaping the destinies of people. The

diaries of some of the early travelers and pioneers appear to have little value at first glance because they merely record the dates and routine commonplaces, such as the hours of rising and retiring, repairs to clothing, harness, wagons, and the like, day after day. Of course, this information may be of great importance in establishing priority of exploration or settlement, and conditions of traveling. But usually such data are neither so significant nor colorful as weather records, descriptions of the topography, the flora and fauna, geology, and other natural features, all of which contribute greatly to the knowledge of a strange new country. Keeping a diary seems to be something like giving road directions to a stranger: some people have a genius for noting essentials and some do not. I have been privileged to see a copy of *Minnesota Farmers' Diaries*, which as already stated, is published as of today. It is a fine example of records of daily occurrences, which taken together form a very important chapter in the history of the state. The farmer's record of day-by-day activities, of the crops he raised, of the implements he used, of the dates on which he planted and harvested his crops are just as important as a historical document as the diary of a man prominent in business or political life. In fact, since they deal with the predominant industry of Minnesota, they are of first importance.

Current advertisements in the local press for a given period reflect much of the way of living, forms of entertainment, styles of clothes, conditions of health, and even prevalent diseases. Advertisements in old papers, especially of medicines, perhaps should not be relied upon too implicitly as to the miracles promised—there were no food and drug laws then—but they do indicate what ailed the people.

As with manuscripts, so in the building of a museum, discrimination is necessary to avoid filling the place with objects that have no particular value. A good illustration of what makes a museum item valuable, hinges on the fact that George Washington wore false teeth. If those teeth are

valuable as a museum exhibit, it is not only because they belonged to him, but also because they represent progress in the science of dentistry previous to 1799. If they were no different from the common run of false teeth of Washington's day, they have no greater value than any other set.

The Minnesota Historical Society has been wise in its selections of manuscripts and museum exhibits, and the work in these fields is a continuing and growing one. Manuscripts having to do with the lives and accomplishments of Minnesotans who have contributed to world progress are especially appropriate for the society's collections. Among the most important acquisitions of recent years are the Lindbergh Papers. This collection comprises thousands of letters and other manuscripts pertaining chiefly to the activities of Charles A. Lindbergh the elder, who was Congressman from Minnesota during the years from 1907 to 1917. They not only tell the story of a great Minnesota liberal leader; they illuminate a stirring chapter in the history of Minnesota and the nation. While the activities of the Lindberghs, father and son, like those of James J. Hill, Archbishop Ireland, Bishop Whipple, Senator Kellogg, Justice Butler, and others, have had an influence far beyond the boundaries of Minnesota, there is no more suitable or appropriate place for keeping the records of their lives and achievements than in the collections of this society.

Although the state historical society does not take the place of technical and business libraries and museums, it has not neglected the progress of manufacturing, trade, and commerce. There is at least one exhibit in the Minnesota Historical Society's museum that illustrates an era in transportation. It is a two-wheeled oxcart which was used in the Red River trade between St. Paul and Fort Garry. Similar carts had been used by primitive people in various parts of the world from time immemorial—actually from that unknown date when the wheel was invented, or devised, by slicing off the end of a log. Except that the carts became

wagons and carriages, the same form of transportation prevailed for overland traffic until the steam locomotive replaced the horse and ox for tractive power. In our Northwest, that happened in the 1860's and 1870's, when railways were extended westward from St. Paul. Dr. Follwell's statement of their effect on Minnesota is as follows:

As the railroad lines extended, the prairie schooner, the stage-coach, and the steamboat lost importance. The steam cars ran every day and their arrivals and deliveries were punctual. Journeys of days were shortened to hours. Grain and dairy products, which previously could stand but fifty or sixty miles of transportation to primary markets, could now be hauled hundreds of miles, and heavy commodities like coal and lumber could be shipped out in return. The movement of merchandise and mails was greatly expedited. . . . The old river counties and those next behind them received goodly additions and population now flowed past them into the "back counties." The cultivated area of the state, which was not much over 600,000 acres in 1865, was trebled in the next five years and was enlarged to 2,816,413 acres in 1875. While the multiplication of farms was thus rapid, equally so was the planting of villages along the railroad lines.

Indeed, the story of colonization by the railroads is a stirring chapter in the social and economic development of the country that has rarely been told.

It is significant that Minnesota's first railway was built from St. Paul toward the West and not to Minnesota from the East, and that it started at the levee, the "head of navigation" on the Mississippi. The first railway equipment was brought up the river on a boat. The railway had an ambitious name, Saint Paul and Pacific, and it failed financially. But its successor, the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba, was exactly what the name implied, a grand portage route between the upper Mississippi and the Red River, and it prospered. Many of the original railways, among them the Burlington, were just such portages. The internal improvement program of Illinois which was undertaken a hundred years ago was based upon the correlation of water and rail carriage. Thus the Burlington system began as a cross-state project to connect Lake Michigan at

Chicago with the Mississippi at Burlington, above the Keokuk rapids, and at Quincy below the rapids. Chicago, Burlington and Quincy described it perfectly, and the name has so remained, although the territory served has far outgrown the original concept.

After the introduction of the iron horse, the evolution of railway transportation followed along two lines: first, expansion of mileage, and, second, improvement of facilities and service. Both went forward at a rapid pace. The record of railroad building is told by statistics of growth within state boundaries and by annual reports of the various companies. Minnesota, beginning with ten miles between St. Paul and St. Anthony, now a part of Minneapolis, in 1862, came to have ninety-four hundred miles in 1929. During the last ten years railway mileage in Minnesota and the country as a whole has decreased substantially. Refinement and perfection of the railway plant has continued, however, with constant betterment of service, finer trains, greater speeds, and more dependability. Naturally, these achievements have been largely interstate in character, and the records concerning them have been preserved chiefly by the railway industry, or by individual roads. The Burlington, for example, not only has extensive historical files in Chicago, but also has deposited in the business school of Harvard University some six tons of its unusually complete land and colonization records. Richard C. Overton has written a painstaking history, which will be published within a year, of this phase of Burlington activity. The Great Northern has its picturesque "William Crooks," and the Northern Pacific its "Minnetonka"—both now on parade at the New York world's fair—locomotives which almost literally pushed the Red River ox carts into oblivion. All the railroad documents and museum items are, of course, open to inspection by members of state historical societies.

The St. Paul Association of Commerce has written a letter

to its members admirably expressing the interest of a community in the work of the Minnesota Historical Society.² How to co-operate and how to know which records are of historical value are carefully explained. Such has been the response to the association's appeal that important information about business papers of St. Paul firms has been assembled. I hope that other cities and towns will follow St. Paul's splendid example. I am told that one St. Paul firm which replied to this letter indicated that it had in its files its complete employment record during the great depression of the 1890's. That record, when interpreted properly, may be the instrument to reveal a unique chapter in American economic life. If the preliminary investigation is borne out by later study, those records will show that a St. Paul business firm, during the period of deepest depression, was expanding its business and increasing its wage returns, instead of following the usual practice of retrenchment. That may be an early instance of what has come to be a common procedure with highly developed industry—to take advantage of periods of slack demand to improve technique, plant, and the quality of production. By a study of such records, the business community learns to interpret its own past, and it may perhaps learn something to guide its conduct in the future.

Now it is a surprising thing, and hard to understand, that the membership in this historical society is relatively so small. Minnesota had a population of only about six thousand when the society was organized with a hundred and thirty-three charter members; the state has a population of nearly three million now, and the historical society has about sixteen hundred members. I think the lag must be due largely to lack of information about what the society stands for, and what it does; and perhaps to the mistaken idea that

² This letter, which explains the value of business records and makes an appeal to businessmen to aid in their preservation, was written early in August, 1939. *Ed.*

the dead past holds no interest for the up and coming, live businessmen of today. There may be a feeling also that the Minnesota Historical Society is chiefly for descendants of pioneers and early residents, and that others are not especially welcome. Such views are unfortunate and erroneous, too. What has happened in the development of this commonwealth is of great importance to its citizens in all walks of life, for their cultural enjoyment and for their guidance in the future. Life is like a speeding wheel: the minute surface which touches the track is stationary, however fast the wheel may roll. The present is like that point of the wheel, only a fleeting fraction of time. The long past is behind us, and the probable future is ahead. While experiencing the present, we are a part of the past and of the future.

And surely nothing could be more in error than to feel that the historical society belongs to the old settlers and their descendants. To me, coming here a stranger from the Pacific Coast twenty-seven years ago, no group in this friendly community extended more cordiality than the members of the Minnesota Historical Society. I am sure that the same welcome awaits those whose lives and labors are now concerned with Minnesota.

RALPH BUDD

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS



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