

THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY IN 1939

THE SUCCESS of an institution such as the Minnesota Historical Society is measured by the extent to which it fulfills the purposes for which it was established. To this society, the oldest cultural institution in Minnesota, the task of preserving for future generations the record of a people's growth was entrusted more than ninety years ago by the pioneers of a territory itself newly born. Its program was threefold, consisting of the collection of materials relating to the history of Minnesota and its people; the preservation of these materials for the use of future generations of Minnesota citizens; and the dissemination of information about the state's history through public meetings, publications, and the use by the public of the society's library, newspaper, manuscript, and museum collections. What did the Minnesota Historical Society do to carry out this program in 1939?

Each year the work of collecting the historical treasures that tell of Minnesota's growth continues. In the words of Dr. Theodore C. Blegen, this is a "fundamental task in which success depends upon many factors, including patient staff work, the increasing prestige of the society, and the spread of popular interest in Minnesota history." During 1939, the society's library added 3,335 books, pamphlets, and bound volumes of newspapers to its collections, bringing the total count to 200,989 volumes. The newspaper collection now comprises 19,940 volumes, exclusive of duplicates. Currently the society receives 1,004 periodicals, of which 457 are published in Minnesota; and the newspapers regularly filed number 545, of which 475 are published in Minnesota. More than sixty-seven per cent of the society's library accessions in 1939 were received as gifts.

It is interesting to note that in 1938 the proportion was sixty per cent.

Among the accessions in the library and newspaper department were some valuable items. One of the most important gifts of newspapers ever received—both from the standpoint of size and variety—was the collection accumulated by members of the Meighen family of Preston, consisting of more than three thousand unbound issues of 215 newspapers published in Minnesota and other states. Many of these reflect the growth of third parties in Minnesota, and represent valuable additions to the society's files. It might be interesting from an antiquarian point of view to note that the society was recently presented with the first copy of the *St. Anthony Express* to be struck from the press of that journal on May 31, 1851. In addition, the society acquired partial files of a number of rare temperance newspapers and issues of several socialist labor papers. Newly acquired library items of special interest include a copy of a treatise on *American Ornithology*, which is valuable chiefly for the original sketches of Minnesota scenes that have been added on the backs of many of the plates in pencil and ink, and an edition of Lahontan's *Voyages*, published at Amsterdam in 1741. The Minnesota Daughters of the American Revolution have shown their continued interest in the society by aiding in the task of building up its genealogical collection. Two chapters made substantial contributions to the memorial funds which they established several years ago. It would be highly desirable if other organizations or individuals would set up similar funds which might be utilized to build up collections in specified fields. Such memorials are enduring ones, and to an institution like this are of incalculable value.

A total of 155 collections were added to the manuscript resources of the society during the year. Although the number of collections received is slightly smaller than that reported last year, the total volume of additions is about the

same. From the standpoint of quality, however, 1939 was a highly important year. The papers received include those of statesmen, humorists, attorneys, missionaries, farmers, labor leaders, pioneer explorers, and businessmen. Especially significant among the personal papers are those of Cushman K. Davis, attorney, legislator, governor, and United States Senator. Another important collection is that of the Washburn family, famous in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota history. Unfortunately most of these papers are in private hands and the opportunity to acquire them probably will be lost because funds with which to purchase them are lacking. Papers of the Nye brothers, Frank and the humorist "Bill," have added a new note to the society's repertoire, and represent valuable accessions as well. Many papers of Robert Ormsby Sweeny, pioneer druggist, superintendent of the state's first fish hatchery, and president of the Minnesota Historical Society in 1874, have been received. He was important not only in the capacities cited, but as an artist and a cartoonist. Papers, diaries, and sketches of another artist, Wilfred J. Whitefield, also have been added to the society's collections.

During the year, the society acquired several unusual and interesting diaries, including those of Edwin Hatch, a Sioux War veteran and an Indian agent in the West. A diary relating to a trip to Fort Garry in 1870 and other papers left by Nathaniel P. Langford, a former president of this society whose fame is based upon his work as a Montana pioneer and as first superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, were received. The voluminous diaries and extensive correspondence of E. Steele Peake, an Episcopal missionary of northern Minnesota in the last half of the nineteenth century, have been presented. Another interesting and valuable gift is the diary, written in Swedish, together with an English translation, of Andrew Peterson, a farmer and horticulturist who settled in Carver County in 1855.

Records of business firms received include materials of

prime importance in the study of Minnesota economic and social history. Outstanding among these are the records of the country store owned and operated by members of the Meighen family at Forestville in Fillmore County from the early 1850's to the first decade of the present century, when it was closed. The records of this business, complete from beginning to end, will be of untold value to the historian who wishes to study the place of a country store in the social and economic life of Minnesota.

Among other collections received in 1939 are the papers of E. S. Hall, which relate to important chapters in the history of labor in Minnesota, and those of the St. Paul Fire Insurance Patrol, the Pioneer Rivermen's Association, the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly, and the Northern States Co-operative League.

Through the use of photographic copying devices, the society added still more treasures to its resources. Of outstanding importance is a film copy of the famous Ojibway-French dictionary compiled by Father Georges Antoine Belcourt, which for many years was thought to have been destroyed by fire, but which recently was discovered in St. Boniface, Manitoba. The records of a Hennepin County antislavery society were recorded on film, as were numerous other letters and documents in Minnesota and elsewhere.

As custodian of the noncurrent archives of the state, the society received during the past year the valuable archives of the division of forestry in the department of conservation and of the industrial and tax commissions.

The collections in the museum were enlarged in 1939 by 630 gifts — historical, ethnological, and numismatic. In addition, the already huge picture collection received 1,513 additions, bringing the total number to 65,402. Here alone is a resource of tremendous value. The historian of the future who wishes to recapture the spell of the St. Paul Winter Carnival of 1939 or to picture the horror of the Anoka tornado of last summer will have photographic

evidence of the events to consult, for these subjects were covered by two large gifts. Miniature water colors of Minnesota scenes in the 1850's by George Fuller, a pencil sketch of Fort Abercrombie in 1863 by a member of the garrison, photographs of Duluth in the 1870's, and photographic copies of a series of Minnesota paintings by Peter Rindisbacher are among other additions to the picture collection.

Among the gifts of museum objects, outstanding was the furniture, silver, and military equipment received from the estate of Captain William B. Folwell. Many of the items already are on display, and the remainder will be placed on exhibition as soon as the task of reconditioning them is completed. Interesting and important additions to the costume and dress accessory collections also were made during the year, and the flag collection was enriched by two items— an American flag used to cover the coffins of American soldiers in Rouen, France, and a Philippine flag captured at the battle of Malabon. Representative equipment used by the St. Paul Fire Insurance Patrol, which was disbanded early in 1939, forms part of the exhibit of fire fighting equipment built up by the society. These are only a few of the reminders of the past which found their way into the society's museum during the year.

One of the yardsticks by which the success of the society may be measured is the extent to which the public makes use of its collections. It is notable that many attendance records of 1939 exceeded those previously set. The number of visitors to the museum during the year exceeded 45,000. Included in this figure are 453 classes from grade and high schools and institutions of collegiate rank, with a membership of 12,269. The total attendance exceeds the record for 1938 by more than 1,200. The manuscript division served the needs of 1,290 persons—about 500 less than in 1938. The decrease can be explained by a change in a ruling of the old age assistance bureau, whereby that state agency handles certain local claims for assistance for

which data formerly was obtained through a personal search of records in the society's manuscript division. In the library, 5,835 readers used more than 30,000 books, about the same as last year. The newspaper department served 3,579 readers, a record for all time. They consulted more than 12,000 bound volumes and over 70,000 current issues of newspapers. When compared with the statistics of ten years ago, these figures assume almost astronomical proportions. Over 2,000 more persons used the facilities of the library in 1939 than were recorded in 1929. The number of readers in the newspaper department and manuscript division were more than four times as great as in 1929, and the visitors to the museum increased by more than 12,000 over the number reported a short decade ago.

The figures, however, do not reflect the total of public service. Thousands of requests for information have been answered by telephone, and in the library alone more than 350 inquiries were answered by mail. Numerous special exhibits of books, newspapers, manuscripts, and museum materials were prepared for display in the society's building and in stores and public buildings throughout the state. Additional thousands of people were reached through the medium of public addresses, over fifty of which were given by staff members during the year.

The society, as is customary, conducted several open meetings for its members and friends in 1939. On January 16 the ninetieth annual meeting was held with four scheduled sessions. A local history conference convened in the society's auditorium in the morning, a luncheon meeting was conducted at the St. Paul Athletic Club at noon, and in the afternoon a business meeting was held in the society's auditorium. Professor Walter S. Campbell of the University of Oklahoma, better known by his pen name of "Stanley Vestal," delivered the annual address on the subject "The Humanity of the American Indian" at an evening meeting in the society's auditorium. All sessions of this annual meet-

ing were well attended. On April 17 the Reverend L. R. Cooper of Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, gave an illustrated lecture on old Fort Crawford before an audience of about eighty-five people in the society's auditorium. On June 15, 16, and 17, the society's seventeenth annual summer tour and convention was held, with meetings at Rochester, Harmony, Winona, and Frontenac. On October 20 the society celebrated the ninetieth anniversary of its establishment, and at the same time paid a tribute to Dr. Blegen in appreciation for his services to the society during the seventeen years that he was a member of its staff. The day's events included a luncheon sponsored by the St. Paul Association of Commerce at the St. Paul Athletic Club, which was attended by more than three hundred people; a tea given by the Misses Anita and Laura Furness for members of the society's executive council and friends in the historic Ramsey home; and an evening meeting in the society's auditorium, at which Dr. Blegen spoke on "Ballads and Songs of Immigrant and Pioneer" before about a hundred and sixty people.

Four issues of the society's magazine, *Minnesota History*, comprising a volume of 470 pages without the index, were published. The volume contains twenty formal articles dealing with such subjects as a scientist's interpretation of history, regionalism in American literature, a sketch of a well-known Norwegian author who made his home in Minnesota for a few years in the 1880's, health and medicine in a Minnesota pioneer community, and the development of the tourist trade on the upper Mississippi a century ago. Nineteen reviews of books important to an understanding of Minnesota history were published in addition to a much larger number of shorter notes and articles about publications of Minnesota interest. *Minnesota History* has now completed its twentieth volume, and its twenty-fifth year. During that time it has had but two editors — Dr. Buck from 1915 to 1922, and Dr. Blegen from 1922 to the close of

1939—and under their able direction it has, in the words of the author of a recent study of the *Museum and Popular Culture*, provided hundreds of “members and subscribers with invaluable material for deepening their understanding of the society and economic background of their state.” *Minnesota History*, remarks the writer of an editorial in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* of July 27, 1939, has become “widely known as one of the best periodicals of its kind in the country.”

On October 20 the society published, as a special ninetieth anniversary volume, the third in the series of *Narratives and Documents*, containing two early *Minnesota Farmers' Diaries*. Dr. Rodney C. Loehr of the department of history in the University of Minnesota contributed an introduction and notes to the diaries, and Dr. Blegen, as editor of the society's publications, wrote a preface to the volume. The book has been acclaimed by historians throughout the nation as a valuable contribution to the social and economic history of the frontier. The society also distributed twelve numbers of its monthly clipsheet, the *Minnesota Historical News*, and four numbers of the *Check List of Minnesota Public Documents*.

The chief means by which the society reaches out to enrich the lives of its members and friends is through its publications. The record of publications for the year is one of which the society may well be proud. Yet it serves but to call attention to the need for the means with which to place before the people of Minnesota pioneer diaries, business records, letters, missionary papers, fur trade records, and other sources for Minnesota and Northwest history, to say nothing of numerous monographs that are waiting for publication. The people of Minnesota are hungry to hear the story of their state and those who have contributed to its development. The Minnesota Historical Society could satisfy that hunger if it had the means with which to do so. The need for a fund with which to further this work is a

basic one. It has been stressed before by my predecessors. I wish to repeat their appeal. How better could a man or woman, or a group of men and women, further the cause of Minnesota history than by assisting in the creation of a special publication fund? By gifts or bequests, large or small, such a fund can be established.

During the last half-dozen years, the society has profited greatly through the work of the WPA and kindred organizations. In 1939 the accomplishments of workers engaged in projects sponsored by the society were again substantial. Under the able direction of Mr. Jacob Hodnefield, the Minnesota Historical Records Survey prosecuted vigorously the task of publishing in mimeographed form inventories of the county archives of the state. Although this project, like all other WPA work, was hard hit by the dismissal at the end of August of most of its workers for a thirty-day period—a regulation which applied to all employees who had been on the WPA payroll for eighteen months or more—it achieved creditable results. During the year the survey published inventories of archives in no fewer than nine counties and reports on the archives preserved in this state by four departments of the federal government. The project likewise continued to assemble information relating to the archives of other units of government and of churches, clubs, and other organizations. An inventory of early American imprints preserved in Minnesota institutions, also conducted by the Historical Records Survey, continued to progress during the year. It is carefully and conscientiously carried on, and, when completed, it will be a valuable tool for historians and scholars generally. The systematic stocktaking of historical records by this group of interested workers has resulted in the discovery for the society of many unusual and interesting documents, and as the survey's work progresses, the value of its accomplishments becomes increasingly evident.

The society's own WPA project continued to operate dur-

ing the year under the general supervision of the curator of the museum. Like the Historical Records Survey, however, it was slowed down by the thirty-day layoff provision of the WPA law. Starting with twenty-nine workers, the project was gradually reduced in personnel until, during part of September, it operated with but one employee. At the end of the year, seven people were employed on the project. In spite of such difficulties, it achieved notable results in the performance of nonroutine work. Workers engaged in it constructed a number of miniature museum exhibits of historical scenes in Minnesota, advanced the work on the picture index, repaired mutilated books, manuscripts, and newspapers, transcribed material of historical interest in early newspapers, continued a bibliography of Minnesota newspapers, cleaned and arranged documents, made inventories and engaged in other library enterprises, and constructed display cases, filing equipment, and other furniture.

The general Capitol WPA project likewise performed valuable services for the society during the year. One level of stacks in the lower terrace room was so nearly completed that there remains only the installation of lighting fixtures and other electrical equipment to permit its use for the storage of newspapers and manuscripts. Material for a second level of stacks was ordered, but because of its failure to arrive no construction work was possible.

The society's executive committee, in submitting its biennial budget for the years 1939-41, recommended the appropriation of additional funds to permit adjustments of salary inequalities and to provide for the employment of additional assistants in the manuscript division and museum. The amount suggested was \$37,500.00 for salaries during each of the two years of the biennium. The committee also recommended slight increases in the budget requests for supplies and expenses and an appropriation of \$9,000.00 for stacks and shelves in the storage space constructed with WPA assistance under the southwest terrace.

The legislature, however, cut the allowances for salaries to \$31,500.00 for each of the two years in the biennium, and appropriated \$14,000.00 for supplies and expenses in each year. The sum of \$5,000.00 was made available during the fiscal year ending June 30, 1940, for the construction of a portion of the stacks in the excavated area under the terrace. The society, therefore, was brought face to face with a necessity for stringent economies in the administration of its affairs. The need for economy was intensified, however, when legislation was adopted cancelling all unexpended balances in appropriations from previous years. Another action of the legislature which has resulted in a curtailment of activities was that requiring the state department of administration to reduce quarterly allotments of public funds to keep expenditures within the income of the state. However justifiable this action may have been from the standpoint of the state at large, it has resulted in a serious restriction of the society's activities, for the money available was thus reduced by ten per cent.

In most respects 1939 was a normal year—in the number of additions to the society's facilities for research, in the increase in the amount of work required to care for the material, and in the growing use of the society's collections. What was abnormal about the society last year—and it is a condition which has existed for the past several years—is the fact that the personnel necessary for the care of the society's treasures has not increased in proportion to the amount of work which this constantly growing collection demands. In spite of the fact that the society's collections have very nearly doubled in volume during the past twenty years, and that the demands for public service have grown even more, there has been no corresponding increase in the number of employees. The staff, therefore, loyally staggers on, year after year, doing its inadequate best, aware that the problems of caring for the society's collection will be greater next year and the year after. Conceivably there

will arrive a time when a mounting tide of uncompleted work—postponed because of increasing demands for public service—will engulf an inadequately manned staff.

Despite added burdens, staff members have managed to carry on considerable research and writing, and to give expression to their professional interests. Dr. Nute served through the year as assistant professor of history in Hamline University, and during the fall months she taught a course in Minnesota history in the University of Minnesota. She has continued her work on the biographies of Radisson and Groseilliers and soon will have this study ready for publication. She is also the author of an article in the *Journal of Documentary Reproduction*, two in *Minnesota History*, and one in the *Yearbook* of the American Library Association, as well as of about a score of reviews published in the journals of several learned societies. She continues to serve on the editorial board of the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*. In December she attended the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Washington. Mr. Babcock has written many of the news stories of state historical interest published during the year. He also is the author of articles on Louis Provençalle and Ignatius Donnelly appearing, respectively, in *Minnesota History* and the *Hastings Gazette*. He continued to manage the WPA project of the society, and he directed the archaeological project at Grand Portage. During the year he made numerous trips through the state in the interest of historical activity. In June he attended a meeting of the Upper Mississippi Valley Ethno-History Committee at Chicago, and in December he represented the society at a joint meeting of the Society for American Archaeology and the American Anthropological Association at Chicago. Miss Ackermann is the author of an article in the *Yearbook* of the American Library Association. In June she attended the annual meeting of that organization in San Francisco, as did Miss Krausnick and Miss Fawcett. Mrs. Berthel completed the

introduction to a volume of editorials of James Madison Goodhue, which, it is hoped, soon will be published as a volume in the *Narratives and Documents* series. She also prepared a short history of the Minnesota Capitol for the *Legislative Manual* and revised the *Capitol Guide*. Under her direction, the work of compiling information about geographic names in Minnesota for the state geographic board has gone ahead with renewed vigor. Mrs. Warming revised Minnesota articles for several encyclopedias, and made many corrections and additions to the *Union Serial List*. Mrs. Brower made considerable progress on a bibliography of Minnesota fiction. Miss Heilbron contributed articles and reviews to *Minnesota History*, and she made a number of field trips to local history museums in various parts of the state. She also continued her studies of Minnesota art and artists. Dr. Blegen contributed several articles to *Minnesota History* and other publications of learned societies, and through the medium of public addresses to audiences in Minnesota and elsewhere in the nation he continued to demonstrate his leadership in the world of professional historians. He served during the year as vice-president of the Society of American Archivists, on an important committee of the American Historical Association, and on the advisory board of the American Council of Learned Societies.

Changes in the personnel of the society's staff have been of far-reaching significance. In January Miss June S. Day was appointed to the position of catalogue typist, vacated when Mrs. Louise Hedberg Blad was transferred to the post of museum assistant. Miss Gertrude Ackermann was granted a year's leave in September to continue her studies in library work. Her place was taken by Miss Helen McCann, formerly an assistant and stenographer in the manuscript division. Miss Frances Bailey, who served as stenographer in the manuscript division for a short time, was succeeded by Miss Ruth Fritz.

On August 1, Dr. Blegen ended seventeen years of service

to the society, as assistant superintendent and, since 1931, as superintendent. He is spending a year in research under a fellowship awarded by the Norwegian-American Historical Association, and in the autumn of 1940 he will assume full-time duties as professor of American history in the University of Minnesota. A more detailed statement of his achievements and contributions to the cause of history and to this society from 1922 to 1939 has already appeared in this magazine. It was largely because of his wisdom, scholarship, and leadership that the Minnesota Historical Society remained in an outstanding position among American historical societies during the trying years of the depression. His tenure as superintendent was marked by an unparalleled expansion of the public usefulness of the society. He instilled in his co-workers his own will to further the work of the society and inspired them with his own high standards of professional competence and scholarship. I take over the office he so ably filled with a feeling of deep gratitude for the work he did, for the training he gave me, and for the fine friendship he has extended to me through the years.

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MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL



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