

## THE 1940 ANNUAL MEETING OF THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

AT LEAST TWENTY local historical organizations were represented among the sixty people who assembled in the auditorium of the Historical Building at 10:00 A. M. on January 8 for the twentieth annual conference on local history work in Minnesota and the opening session of the ninety-first annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society. Mr. Willoughby M. Babcock, curator of the state society's museum, who presided, began the program by reminding the audience that since 1922, when the St. Louis County Historical Society was founded, no less than fifty-seven county and community historical organizations have become active in Minnesota. The interest of leaders of such work in the welfare and progress of these societies, said Mr. Babcock, is exemplified in the fact that they themselves suggested the problems scheduled for discussion on the present program. A few of these leaders who had met with special success in their own communities had been asked to relate their experiences in solving certain specific problems common to all local historical organizations.

Mr. Otto E. Wieland, president of the St. Louis County society, dealt with the first of these problems, explaining how to proceed in "Popularizing the Work of the County Historical Society." He expressed the belief that, since by law the county commissioners may appropriate funds for the support of a local society, it "becomes the duty of such a society to bring its work to the attention of every intelligent citizen of the county." The two agencies "best suited for spreading a knowledge of local history and stimulating interest in historical study and research," according to Mr. Wieland, are the press and the radio. In St. Louis County, students are encouraged to use the society's resources,

and the organization makes every effort to "maintain sympathetic contact with as many as possible of the various groups and classes represented in the population." Meetings in various sections of St. Louis County familiarize people throughout its extensive area with the society's work and aims. The county's many racial and religious groups, fraternal and industrial organizations, and the like contribute a wealth of material to the society's files. In rural districts, particularly where agriculture has only recently become important, the work of the leisure education department of the county schools has been effective in "awakening and stimulating an active interest in local history." This department encourages the holding of pioneer reunions in agricultural communities, furnishes detailed directions for such celebrations, and prepares and publishes mimeographed booklets on the histories of such communities. Mr. Wieland announced that he had brought with him a few of these booklets, copies of which are being preserved by the St. Louis County Historical Society, and he invited his hearers to examine them.

The conference next turned its attention to the problem of "Financing a Local Historical Museum." Mrs. Bunn T. Willson, secretary of the Olmsted County Historical Society, who discussed this subject, declared that her organization's museum at Rochester was "literally financed without money, contradictory as that may seem." She told how, under the leadership of Mr. Burt W. Eaton, president of the Olmsted County society, a few enthusiastic workers had organized this society in 1926; how the co-operation of the Rochester Business and Professional Women's Club, which not only donated funds, but assembled more than six hundred museum objects, was enlisted; how quarters were finally obtained last year in the basement of the new Rochester library. The problem of obtaining display cases was solved when Mr. Earl A. Vine of Rochester presented a large number of used glass doors and posts from cases,

which were adapted to the society's needs by WPA labor. All the collections are now "in display cabinets under lock and key," and the museum is ready for its formal opening. The speaker expressed the hope that funds for future maintenance could be obtained from membership dues and county appropriations, and that eventually the Olmsted County museum could occupy a separate building.

How the Blue Earth County Historical Society obtained a home of its own was explained by the next speaker, Mr. Horace W. Roberts of Mankato, president of the organization, who dealt with the problem of "Housing a Local Historical Collection." He reviewed the story of the Blue Earth County society, of its early organization in 1916, of the collections that were lost in a fire that destroyed the building of the Mankato State Teachers College, of the services of Judge Lorin Cray and Thomas Hughes, and of the legacy from Judge Cray that made possible the purchase of the Hubbard mansion in which the museum is now housed. City and county appropriations enable the society to keep this museum open three hours daily, said Mr. Roberts. In addition to the historic house which it purchased, the speaker said, the society has the use of a pavilion at Sibley State Park. Exhibits there displayed are viewed each summer by thousands of visitors.<sup>1</sup>

The final speaker on the morning program, Dr. Arthur J. Larsen, acting superintendent of the state historical society, told of a "Handbook for Local Historical Workers" that is now in preparation under the auspices of the Social Science Research Council. In an "effort to promote professional and lay co-operation" in the field of local history, the council in 1937 instructed Dr. Theodore C. Blegen, then superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society, and Professor Edgar B. Wesley of the University of Minnesota to prepare such a handbook. The general plan of the

<sup>1</sup>The museum of the Blue Earth County Historical Society is described *post*, p. 104-106.

work, as outlined by Dr. Larsen, includes discussions of various types of source materials, such as local archives, manuscript letters and diaries, business records, newspapers, museum objects, books, maps, and the like; a section on the writing of local history, with lists of specific subjects for investigation; suggestions for the organization and activities of a local historical society, with an evaluation of its place in the community; and a discussion of local history and the schools. The speaker quoted Dr. Blegen's statement that the proposed handbook, at best, "will be a tool whose value will depend upon use." Dr. Larsen expressed his own conviction that it "will be a powerful stimulus in the interest of a good cause—that of planned local historical research."

More than a hundred and seventy people attended the luncheon session of the annual meeting, which convened at the St. Paul Athletic Club at 12:15 P.M. Judge Julius E. Haycraft of Fairmont, vice-president of the society, who presided, announced that this was the largest attendance ever recorded for such a session. After commenting upon the early organization of the Minnesota Historical Society, a fact that accounts in large measure for the completeness of its collections, he introduced the Honorable Mike Holm, secretary of state, who presented to the society the "Great Seal of the State of Minnesota" that was used in his office in the early days of statehood. The importance of the state seal, which must be affixed to all legal documents, was stressed by Mr. Holm before he turned over to the society's president, Mr. Ira C. Oehler of St. Paul, the ponderous implement with which it was formerly impressed. A printed statement about the history of the seal, with an illustration showing both the territorial and state seals of Minnesota, was then distributed among members of the audience.

For the eighth in a series of addresses which he himself had inaugurated in 1933, Judge Haycraft next called upon

Mr. James Gray, literary and dramatic critic for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and the *St. Paul Dispatch*, whose writings in the fields of fiction and criticism have received national recognition. In the seven years that have elapsed since the presiding officer discussed how "A Judge Looks at History," a businessman, a newspaperman, a doctor, a novelist, a librarian, and a scientist have set forth their views of history before meetings of the society. Mr. Gray contrasted the somewhat shallow writings of the 1920's with the more substantial literary productions of the 1930's in dealing with his subject, "A Literary Critic Looks at History." In the latter decade, he said, "we wished to recover a sense of continuity so that we might feel that we had solid ground under our feet," and this "desire to recover the past" accounts in large measure for the success of recent novelists and biographers who have turned to American history for their material. "It speaks well for the maturing taste of the American public," according to Mr. Gray, that such books as Douglas Freeman's biography of Lee and Carl Van Doren's re-examination of the life of Franklin "should actually have made their way to the best selling lists." Readers of this magazine will find elsewhere in the present issue the full text of Mr. Gray's stimulating address, in which he expresses his gratitude for the "wealth that a new-born interest in history, particularly the history of our own country, has opened up to the reviewer" and to the public.

The third speaker on the luncheon program, Mrs. Fred G. Atkinson of Minneapolis, recalled the career of her father, Dr. George H. Bridgman, who from 1883 to 1912 served as president of Hamline University. She is the author of a chapter on this period of the school's history which appears in a volume published last year to commemorate the eighty-fifth anniversary of its founding. As a background for her narrative she traced the early years of the frontier university, which was established at Red Wing

by the Methodist church in 1854. The drawing up of a charter by William Pitt Murray, the naming of the school for a bishop who endowed it with property valued at twenty-five thousand dollars, the financial difficulties precipitated by the panic of 1857 and the Civil War, and the end of the Red Wing era in 1869 were touched upon by the speaker. It was not until 1880 that the school reopened in St. Paul, and to this frontier university on the outskirts of a raw midwestern city, President Bridgman came three years later. Mrs. Atkinson presented a moving description of her father's arrival at the little station west of St. Paul, whence he walked through fields of corn to reach the one small building that then housed Hamline. She reviewed some of the problems that confronted the new president in building up the curriculum, the faculty, the student body, the standards, and the physical equipment of the school itself, and she paid a sincere tribute to Dr. Bridgman's breadth of view and to his ability to make friends—qualities that did much to help establish Hamline University and to give its story an important place in Northwest history. Upon the conclusion of this charming address, Mrs. A. A. Milne, a daughter of Murray, was introduced to the audience and made a few remarks about her father's part in the founding of Hamline.

In the afternoon, representatives of local historical societies and others interested in community historical activity were invited to meet in the Historical Building for a round-table discussion of the problems involved in the administration of local societies. In the unavoidable absence of Miss Ella Hawkinson of the Clay County Historical Society, who was to have directed this informal session, Mr. Babcock met about twenty-five people in the auditorium. For about two hours they examined various problems, including those discussed by the speakers who appeared on the morning program. The relation of the state and local historical societies and the possibility of listing the holdings of the

local organizations also were considered. Among those who participated in the discussion were Dr. Blegen, Mr. Henry N. Benson of the Nicollet County society, Judge Haycraft, the Reverend M. Casper Johnshoy of Pope County, Mr. Melvin Ouse of Wilkin County, Mr. Roberts, Mr. E. L. Roney of Washington County, and Mrs. Willson.

The meeting of the executive council and the society's business session, which in former years has been combined with an afternoon session of the annual meeting, was held this year at 7:30 P. M. in the superintendent's office. At this time Dr. Larsen, who had been serving as acting superintendent since Dr. Blegen's resignation on August 1, was elected secretary and superintendent of the society.

Immediately following this meeting, the annual address was presented in the auditorium of the Historical Building before an audience of about sixty people. The speaker, Dr. Nelson Vance Russell, professor of American history in Carleton College, Northfield, took the place on the program of Professor Elvin C. Stakman of the college of agriculture in the University of Minnesota, who had been scheduled to speak and was unable to appear because of illness. This circumstance was explained by the presiding officer, Mr. Oehler, who introduced Dr. Russell and announced that he is the author of a newly published volume on the *British Régime in Michigan and the Old Northwest, 1760-1796*. Professor Stakman was to have spoken on "History in Science and Science in History"; Professor Russell took as his subject "Democracy." He pictured the American youth of today as bewildered, as knowing little of his democratic heritage, and as being thus susceptible to the propaganda of the dictatorships. The remedy for this situation, said the speaker, is to be found in education, in teaching every citizen to have a "full appreciation of the political, social, and intellectual development" of America. People must be stimulated to study the past in order to understand the present; they must learn that the "culture

and civilization of America are of profound significance and importance." Upon the conclusion of Dr. Russell's address, refreshments were served in the west hall of the museum, where an informal reception for members and friends of the society brought to a close its ninety-first annual meeting.

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MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ST. PAUL



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