

THE STATE HISTORICAL CONVENTION OF 1940

THE EIGHTEENTH state historical convention under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society was held on August 10 and 11, 1940, when members of the society joined with residents of northeastern Minnesota in celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the discovery of iron ore on the Mesabi Range. Two of the three sessions that made up the convention were held at Hibbing and Mountain Iron in the heart of the Mesabi country; the opening session was arranged at Garrison on Mille Lacs Lake, on the route from the Twin Cities to the range. Evidence that there is considerable interest in the history of the Mesabi country may be found in the fact that nearly a hundred people made the entire tour, and that the attendance at some sessions far exceeded that figure. More than thirty tourists left the Historical Building on the morning of August 10 in a bus chartered for the occasion, and by the time it reached Anoka on its northward course it had been joined by more than twenty private cars. Brief notes on the background of the region to be traversed were provided by the society in a series of "Glimpses of the History of the Route," distributed among the tourists upon their departure. This mimeographed guide was accompanied by a useful map, showing the location of cities and villages through which the tour would pass.

By noon of the opening day, the tour had reached Garrison, where about a hundred and ten people gathered at the Blue Goose Inn for lunch. On a large porch overlooking the wide expanse of Mille Lacs Lake, they listened to the program that constituted the opening session of the convention. Judge Julius Haycraft of Fairmont, vice-president of

the society, presided, and Miss Frances Densmore of Red Wing, collaborator in the Bureau of American Ethnology, who is widely known for her studies of Indian music, presented the opening address. Some of the "Prominent Leaders among the Chippewa" encountered in the course of these studies were characterized by the speaker. Of those who lived in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries, she had learned from others; many of the leaders of a later day she had known personally. In any case, Miss Densmore pointed out, it was proper to consider these Chippewa on the shores of the great lake which was home to many of them. For example, the first Chippewa character that she described, Nagonabe, was a chief of the Mille Lacs band who took a census of its members in 1849 to determine how many were entitled to annuities. By a method of his own he recorded thirty-four families and a hundred and eight individuals. The speaker next told of two eighteenth-century Chippewa — White Fisher, a chief at La Pointe who led his people in the battle of St. Croix Falls, and Flat Mouth, who was famed as a traveler and diplomat. She characterized both the elder and the younger Hole-in-the-Day as leaders who encouraged their people to learn the ways of the white man and to cultivate the soil. Among the Indians she had known, Miss Densmore listed old Wadena, for whom a Minnesota town is named, and Mejakigijig, chief of the White Earth band, both of whom were enthusiastic dancers. Two leaders of the Grand Medicine lodge at Mille Lacs were Wawiekumig and his wife Nawajibigokwe, who assisted the speaker in obtaining records of the midewiwin songs and their picture mnemonics. Another member of the lodge, Maingans, enacted part of its ceremony before members of the Anthropological Society in Washington and was heavily penalized for doing so. Miss Densmore told of obtaining records of some seventy songs from Ojibwe, a warrior of the younger Hole-in-the-Day's band,

who died at White Earth in 1911. She closed appropriately with a salute to the brave native warriors in whose country the historical society was meeting.

Among the advantages of the society's historical tours is the fact that they give one an opportunity to learn the history of a locality on the spot, said Judge Haycraft in introducing the next speaker, Mary W. Berthel, editorial assistant on the society's staff. She discussed the "Place Names of the Mille Lacs Region," giving special attention to the three counties — Mille Lacs, Crow Wing, and Aitkin — that border on the lake. Here is a section, Mrs. Berthel pointed out, that is "as rich as any part of Minnesota in the variety and interest" of its place names. Descriptive names, Indian names, personal names — reminders of explorers, traders, statesmen, politicians, settlers, miners, lumbermen, and others who have been associated with the region — were enumerated by the speaker. She noted that in the Mille Lacs region, as in other parts of the state, duplications in place names have caused much confusion, and announced that, to cope with this problem, a state geographic board, with power "to change place names in the state for the purpose of eliminating duplication," was established in 1937. Mrs. Berthel's informing paper will appear in full in a future issue of this magazine.

The trip to Hibbing that followed the Garrison meeting was broken at Grand Rapids, where the tourists were conducted through the Blandin Paper Mill as the guests of Mr. Charles K. Blandin. There on the banks of the upper Mississippi they saw in operation a large wood-pulp mill, and watched it convert logs from Minnesota's northern forests into paper upon which tomorrow's newspapers would be printed. By way of the western range towns — Coleraine, Bovey, Calumet, Nashwauk, Keewatin — the tour then proceeded to Hibbing, the metropolis of the Mesabi country. There at 7:00 P. M. well over a hundred people

assembled in the spacious dining room of the Hotel Androy for a dinner meeting and evening session.

It opened with brief addresses of welcome by two prominent residents of Hibbing, Judge Martin J. Hughes, a local pioneer, and Mr. James G. Early of the Hibbing Chamber of Commerce. Mr. Ira C. Oehler of St. Paul, president of the Minnesota Historical Society, who presided, then told something of this organization's work over a period of ninety years and read an extract from an address on the "Mineral Regions of Lake Superior" presented before the society in 1867 by Henry M. Rice. In introducing the speakers of the evening, Mr. Oehler observed that both were experts in fields of science and members of the faculty of the University of Minnesota. He called first upon Dr. Gustav Swanson, assistant professor of entomology and economic zoology, for a paper on "Wild Life and Its Conservation in the Arrowhead Region." This area, the speaker noted in opening, "is unusually interesting to the student of animals or plants because, even though it has been greatly altered by man during the last two hundred years, the changes have been less sweeping than in other parts of our state." Through this "roadless wilderness" one can still travel by canoe and portage over "routes used a century or two ago by explorers, fur traders, and voyageurs." What is more, one can still see there many of the animals and birds that were present when La Vérendrye made his way westward through a maze of lakes and streams. Some animals, such as the woodland caribou, the wolverine, and the marten, it is true, have entirely disappeared from the region; others, like the moose, are comparatively rare. The latter, however, still persists in the Arrowhead country "in what are probably the greatest numbers in the United States." On the other hand, deer, which were not common in the region before the day of the lumberman, have gradually increased in number, and beaver are perhaps "more

abundant than they ever were under primitive conditions." Food for both is now "more plentiful and widespread than it was before logger, farmer, and forest fire removed the virgin coniferous forests." On the whole, said Dr. Swanson, wild life probably "has increased in quantity rather than decreased in the Superior region as a result of the work of the lumberman and the agriculturist," and he maintained that "certainly it has become more diversified." The speaker closed with a plea for the conservation or "wise use" of the fish, game, and fur-bearing animals of this northern wilderness, in order that future generations may enjoy "even a richer heritage of wild life than we have at present."

Mr. Oehler next introduced Dr. George A. Thiel, associate professor of geology in the university, who took as his subject "The Geological Story of the Mesabi Range." With the aid of lantern slides, Dr. Thiel gave a clear and concise picture of the background for the history of the Mesabi country, which has been so completely molded by its iron deposits. The speaker opened his discussion with the startling statement that there is no iron ore in the Mesabi Range, and then hastened to explain that the rich deposits that we associate with its name lie a few miles to the south of the actual hills. This ridge of granite, however, had its function in the geological story of iron, for, as the glaciers moved southward, the range served to protect a layer of Biwabik iron formation lying between layers of Virginia slate and Pokegama quartzite. These and other rock formations in the region tilt toward Lake Superior, an ancient structural basin. The slow action of water, seeping through the formation, said Dr. Thiel, leached out the silica and other valueless mineral matter in the Biwabik formation. Much of this was carried away, but the iron ore, which does not dissolve, stayed behind and was concentrated in ore troughs. A wide zone in the earth's crust in north-

eastern Minnesota is characterized locally by such a concentration of ore, much of which contains fifty per cent or more of iron and is therefore merchantable. Although the Mesabi iron deposits were discovered only a half century ago, geologically speaking they have existed for a very long time. Dr. Thiel's illuminating discussion brought the Hibbing session to a close.

Before leaving Hibbing on the morning of August 10, the tourists stopped to view the Mahoning-Sellers-Hull-Rust mine, a huge and colorful pit two and a half miles long and half a mile to a mile wide, from which some two hundred and sixty-four million tons of ore have been shipped since 1895. They then proceeded to Mountain Iron, the scene of the ore discovery of 1890, to participate in the jubilee program arranged to mark the fiftieth anniversary of that event. On the outskirts of the little mining town, a reception committee awaited the traveling historians, and there they joined in a parade to the Mountain Iron High School, one of the imposing structures that iron has made possible in the range communities. They were then taken on a sight-seeing tour by way of Virginia to Eveleth, where a procession of busses and cars went down into the Leonidas mine, giving the visitors an opportunity to see the enormous shovels at work and to observe open-pit mining operations at close range. Upon returning to Mountain Iron at noon, the tourists assembled in the local high school for a luncheon session, which was attended by nearly two hundred people.

Among the entertainments arranged by the local committee was a performance, during the luncheon, by a treble choir composed of school children and directed by Miss Elsa Perala. Judge Bert Fesler of Duluth, a member of the society's executive council, presided for the session that followed the luncheon. He introduced a number of those in the audience, including Miss Laura Furness of St. Paul, Governor Ramsey's granddaughter, several leaders in the

mining industry, and members of the local committee who had arranged the jubilee celebration. For brief addresses of welcome to the community and the county, the chairman called upon Mr. J. F. Muench of Mountain Iron and Mr. Otto Wieland of Duluth. The latter, who is president of the St. Louis County Historical Society, stressed the importance of the work of the state historical society, praising it not only for assembling and preserving the records relating to the past of the state and recording its story, but for encouraging local historical organizations throughout Minnesota.

On the program that followed, the opening paper was presented by Dr. Arthur J. Larsen, superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society, who took as his subject "The Significance of the Iron Range in Minnesota History." He began by pointing out that during the past half century the "most colorful and most turbulent of Minnesota's many frontiers," the mining frontier, "came into being and with incredible swiftness passed away." It developed in a region that had already been exploited for its fur and timber resources, a region in which men had searched vainly for gold and copper. But the true wealth of the country that the Chippewa designated as the "Mesabi," proved to be iron, and its discovery had an important influence upon the story of Minnesota. Dr. Larsen emphasized the "transformation of a wilderness into towns and cities" that followed this discovery. Most of the range communities were "mushroom cities" that "grew up overnight" in the early 1890's, said the speaker. Such were Biwabik, Eveleth, Hibbing, Mountain Iron, and Virginia, the "Queen City" of the range. The populations of these towns, some of which grew to several thousand within a decade, were marked by a large proportion of men and of young people, and by vast numbers of foreign-born laborers, Finns, Croats, Italians, Austrians, Scandinavians, and members of

“at least thirty-seven other nationalities.” Boardinghouses, saloons, houses of ill fame, and flimsy wooden shacks were common in these mining towns, many of which suffered from disastrous fires in their early years. Others, such as Eveleth and Hibbing, “had to be moved to escape being swallowed in the hungry maw of the steam shovels” when valuable ore deposits were found beneath their streets. As they passed the frontier stage and were rebuilt, the range towns “pioneered in community development,” acquiring schools, parks, libraries, and recreational centers of exceptional quality.

Dr. Larsen's general interpretation of range history was followed by a paper dealing with a special phase of that story, the “Development of the Motorbus Industry on the Mesabi Range.” The speaker, Mr. L. A. Rossman, editor of the *Grand Rapids Herald-Review*, was, Judge Fesler announced in introducing him, especially well qualified to deal with this topic, since he has witnessed many of the events that he described. He told how, in the spring of 1914, Andrew G. Anderson began to carry passengers between old Hibbing and the community of Alice on the present site of the village, using a large Hupmobile and charging twenty-five cents for the round trip. A few weeks later he took into partnership Carl Eric Wickman and Arvid Heed, and the latter brought a second automobile into the service. Within a year these transportation pioneers were ordering larger vehicles, and by 1918 they had formed a company and were operating eighteen busses. In 1922 Wickman and Heed withdrew, going to Duluth, where they established bus service to the Twin Cities and on the North Shore. How this business eventually developed into a motorbus system of national proportions, the Greyhound Lines, with Chicago as a center was explained by Mr. Rossman. He made the interesting observation that Minnesotans from the Mesabi country “are today found wherever

busses operate." Mr. Rossman's informing contribution to transportation history will appear in full in a future issue of this magazine.

For the final paper of the session, Judge Fesler called upon Mr. Nathan Cohen, literary and dramatic critic of the *Duluth News-Tribune*. In his discussion of "The Merritts and Their Contribution to Range History," he dealt with the actual discovery of the Mesabi iron deposits half a century ago. Into his narrative he wove many anecdotes about members of this famous family, some of whom he had known personally as friends and neighbors. In considerable detail he reviewed the story of the Merritts—brothers and nephews—of their experiences as "traders, woodsmen, explorers, and discoverers of the first ore on the Mesabi Range, and of their financial difficulties which culminated in a spectacular suit against John D. Rockefeller." He told how Lewis Merritt and his sons homesteaded at Oneota in the 1850's, how the father participated in the Vermilion gold rush, how his belief in the presence of iron in the Mesabi country inspired his sons to search for it there while engaged as surveyors and timber cruisers, how Leonidas' conviction that the ore was not in the hills but in basins finally led to its discovery at Mountain Iron on November 16, 1890. Though the Merritts now had their ore, said Mr. Cohen, the "hazardous business of mining and marketing lay ahead." Almost unlimited capital was needed to provide railroads, docks, and ships, and to begin mining operations. The Merritts proved to be better explorers than financiers; they became "involved in too many ventures" and eventually lost all their holdings. Tragically, they were never able to retrieve the empire that seemed within their grasp in 1892, when the first ore was shipped from Mountain Iron. Their name, however, said the speaker, will be forever associated with the scene of their discovery.

Following this paper, a member of the Mountain Iron Golden Jubilee Committee extended to the tourists a cordial invitation to remain in the community for the program of that and the following day. Among its features were the presentation of a pageant entitled the "Birth of the Mesabi" and the unveiling of a monument commemorating the discovery of iron. Since the society's tour came to a close with the Mountain Iron session, some of the tourists doubtless availed themselves of this opportunity. Others went to lake resorts in the vicinity, such as Birch Point Inn on Vermilion Lake, where those who traveled in the chartered bus spent the night of August 10. With a richer appreciation for the backgrounds of the Mesabi region and a deeper understanding of its role in Minnesota history, those who participated in the tour returned to the Twin Cities on Sunday, August 11.

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