

## THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY IN 1940

A REVIEW of the activities of the Minnesota Historical Society during the past year has a particular significance. We live in a world torn by conflict between two concepts of political, social, and economic life—the totalitarian idea of rigid controls and repression of mankind for the sake of the state, and the democratic theory that government, society, and economic systems were made for mankind, and not mankind for them. As a nation, we support the latter theory, and we look to the records of the past to justify our stand.

In history are to be found the answers to many of the problems that now confront us, and our success in solving them is a measure of the extent to which the Minnesota Historical Society and similar institutions have fulfilled their mission of preserving the records of America's past. If our task has been well done, the records will be available to prove that in democratic government and institutions lies the strength of the nation. If we have failed in the past, our democracy is in peril, for we cannot learn the truth. The work of historical societies, therefore, is extremely important to America today.

In a review of the society's work in 1940, what it has done to reach out to the people of the state is of prime importance. Probably the most intimate personal contact this institution has with the people of Minnesota is through its membership. In the past year, 100 new individual members and 7 new institutional members were enrolled, but this gain was partially offset by the death of 38 members and the cancellation of 47 memberships because of nonpayment of dues. At the end of 1940, the society had on its rolls 1,323 active members. It had also 53 institutional members and

205 subscribing schools and libraries, making a total membership of 1,581.

It is largely through its publications that the society maintains contact with its members. Beginning with the issue for March, 1940, *Minnesota History* adopted a new and simplified cover design. The four numbers of the magazine which make up volume 21 form a book of 458 pages, exclusive of the index. It contains thirteen major articles, five shorter contributions published under the heading "Notes and Documents," and thirty-two reviews of books of Minnesota and Northwest interest. Altogether, fifty contributions were prepared by thirty-five different authors. Notable among them are some valuable documentary source materials. "The Narrative of Samuel W. Pond," edited by Dr. Theodore C. Blegen and published in three installments under the title "Two Missionaries in the Sioux Country," is delightful and instructive reading. Important new light on life at Grand Portage in the first decade of the nineteenth century is furnished by a series of documents translated and edited by Dr. Nute. An article of particular interest is James Gray's "A Literary Critic Looks at History," a stimulating review of American literature since the first World War. There are other articles of equal value and interest dealing with such varied aspects of Minnesota history as transportation, art, labor, place names, north woods folklore, and the medical books of a leading Minnesota physician and surgeon.

Other publications of the year include the *Quarterly Check List of Minnesota Public Documents*, prepared by Miss Jerabek and Miss Krausnick, and the monthly *Minnesota Historical News*. It is regrettable that, because of a lack of funds, no special volumes appeared last year, although several are ready for publication. They include a group of missionary records relating to Minnesota and the Red River Valley, edited by Miss Nute; a selection of the writings of James M. Goodhue, the editor of Minnesota's

first newspaper, collected and prepared for publication by Mrs. Berthel; and sundry special bulletins, notably guides to the society's records of organizations and to other manuscript depositories in Minnesota.

These are but a few of the special publications which should be issued by the society in fulfillment of its obligations to the members of the society in particular, and to the citizens of Minnesota in general. For more than a dozen years my predecessors have called attention to the crying need for a publication fund. I repeat that the Minnesota Historical Society must create a publication fund if it is to present to the people of this state intelligently planned and scholarly accounts of Minnesota's past. We cannot afford to fail in performing this duty.

Each year the society conducts a series of open meetings as a means of arousing in the people of the state a consciousness of their part in its history. The annual meeting, held on January 8, consisted of three major sessions—a local history conference held in the society's auditorium in the morning, a luncheon program at the St. Paul Athletic Club, and an evening meeting in the Historical Building. Although all sessions were well attended, the luncheon meeting in particular drew an unusually large audience. On August 9 and 10 the society held its eighteenth annual summer convention, joining the communities of the Mesabi Range in celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the discovery of iron ore at Mountain Iron. Sessions were held at Garrison on Mille Lacs Lake, at Hibbing, and at Mountain Iron. On October 14 about seventy-five people assembled for an open meeting following the regular fall meeting of the executive council.

One evidence of the Minnesota Historical Society's service to the people of Minnesota is to be found in attendance figures. During 1940, a total of almost 38,000 visitors to the museum was recorded. Since this count is based only upon the number of people who made use of the elevator

service, it is safe to say that the actual number of visitors was much larger—probably approaching 60,000. An unusually large number of school classes visited the society during the year—more than 400, comprising almost 12,000 students. During legislative years the total of such attendance is usually high, but never before in a nonlegislative year has there been such substantial evidence of the educational value of the Minnesota Historical Society to the public schools of the state. In the library 6,858 readers made use of more than 30,000 volumes. The number of readers represents an increase of almost 1,000 over the totals for 1939, although the number of books used was somewhat smaller than the figure for the previous year. The newspaper department served the needs of 3,201 readers who consulted 7,701 bound volumes of newspapers and 59,515 current issues. In the manuscript division the number of readers reached the highest figure ever reported in any one year—2,185. This is almost double the number reported in 1939, an increase that is explained partly by the extraordinary demands for proof of age from old-age assistance applicants, from government and industrial employees, and from the federal government for draft registration purposes.

But figures are inadequate to indicate the full extent of service to the public by the society. Through special exhibits in the Historical Building and in stores and offices throughout the state a message of history has been carried to uncounted thousands of Minnesotans. The "Information Bureau" has answered hundreds of requests by letter and by telephone. Finally, through public addresses, the society has reached still other thousands, for six staff members responded to sixty-three requests for such talks during the year.

The society has diligently pursued its task of building up its collections. In 1940 the library added 2,790 books, pamphlets, and bound volumes of newspapers, bringing the

total count to 203,779 volumes. The newspaper collection now comprises 20,371 bound volumes, exclusive of duplicates. Currently the society receives 1,068 periodicals, 506 of which are published in the state, and 597 newspapers, 527 of which are Minnesota publications. About two-thirds of the additions to the library were received as gifts.

Among the many interesting and valuable additions to the newspaper collections are a partial file of the *Lake City Sentinel*, covering the years from August, 1885, to August, 1887; the *North St. Paul Sentinel* for the twenty years following August, 1887; the *Rushford Star* from August 9, 1877, to August 13, 1885; the *Pepin* [Wisconsin] *Star* from September 4, 1884, to August 27, 1885; and the first issue of the *Crosby Courier*, dated March 9, 1911. Newly acquired library items of interest include a photographic copy of "Un document inédit sur LaHontan" by Froidevaux, an article originally published in the *Journal de la société des americanistes de Paris* for 1902-03; a speech delivered in the national House of Representatives on January 5, 1869, by William Windom, entitled "Northern Pacific Railroad"; and various publications relating to the Farmers' Alliance and the Populist movement of the 1880's and 1890's. The Minnesota Daughters of the American Revolution have again shown their interest in the society by presenting copies of valuable genealogical indexes, several volumes of typewritten genealogical records, and a gift of money to be added to a book fund previously established. Individual chapters of the same organization, through memorial funds, have contributed valuable items of Americana which otherwise could not have been made available in the society's library. The Colonial Dames of America have been equally generous, with gifts of such publications as Rines's *Old Historic Churches of America* and Terry's *Old Inns of Connecticut*. Through the forethought of other friends of the society, its collections of campaign materials were augmented and many other items of an ephem-

eral nature were acquired which otherwise would probably have been lost.

There also have been many notable additions to the manuscript collections. Among the 181 gifts of the year were diaries and personal papers, records of business houses and organizations, and numerous additions to individual collections. In many respects the most important collection placed in the safekeeping of the society last year is that of Engebreth H. Hobe, for forty years Norwegian consul in St. Paul. These papers cover not only the entire range of Hobe's distinguished career as a citizen of Minnesota, but also the activities of a multitude of Norwegian immigrants who struggled to establish themselves in the Northwest. The papers and scrapbooks of Axel Lindegard reveal the life of a Swedish immigrant in the Red River Valley; and the scrapbook of J. P. McGaughey, a leader in the Knights of Labor, yields important information about the labor movement in Minnesota in the eighties. Some letters from the papers of Algernon S. Washburn tell of the activities of his family, which was prominent in the history of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Illinois. Items relating to Thomas S. Williamson and James Gilfillan contain information about missionary activity on the Minnesota frontier, and the papers of Jeremiah Russell tell of an Indian trader in the same wilderness area. Records of the Chute, Lynn Haines, and N. P. Langford families are of a later generation, but are no less important in unfolding the story of the growth of a democratic state; and those of James Gray preserve the record of a prominent Minneapolis newspaperman and an important political figure a generation ago.

Among the important records of business firms recently acquired are the Omejer Papers. They reveal the growth of a business in the Red River Valley during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century. The story of their acquisition illustrates the way in which the Minnesota Historical Society reaches out into the world. In Norway, Captain

Thor Omejer, a member of the society, learned of its efforts to collect business papers. In the attic of his home reposed papers relating to his father's business ventures in Minnesota, and he at once sent them to the society. They arrived just before the German occupation of Norway. Another valuable collection of business records is that of Thorne, Norrish and Company, a firm which operated at Hastings from 1860 to 1892.

Mention of but a few of the valuable diaries received by the society will serve to illustrate their variety and usefulness. Of great charm is the series kept by Charles F. Johnson, the proprietor of a book store and a prominent civic official of Duluth in the later decades of the nineteenth century. The diaries, covering the period from 1870 to 1896, are beautifully illustrated with pen-and-ink sketches and reveal many aspects of life in the "Zenith City." The diary of Irvin Rollins, copied on microfilm by the society from originals in the possession of his family, reveals aspects of rural life in southern Minnesota during the twenty years after 1855. It is an important addition to the society's collection of farmers' diaries.

The society has made considerable progress in its program of collecting records of institutions. Of importance in this category are records of the First Methodist Church of St. Paul and the Linden Hills Congregational Church of Minneapolis. The story of the Minnesota School of Missions may be traced in part through records of that institution, and additional information about such organizations as the Minnehaha Grange and the Upper Mississippi Improvement Association may be found in papers of those institutions recently added to collections previously established.

The museum collections also have been marked by an impressive growth. A total of 675 gifts, classified as historical, ethnological, archaeological, and numismatic, were received. There also were added 1,193 pictures, which

bring the society's picture collection to a total of 66,595. More than 27,000 of these are portraits. Of particular interest among the pictures recently received are attractive oil paintings of Colonel and Mrs. Josiah Snelling. It is planned to exhibit these portraits in the Round Tower Museum at Fort Snelling as soon as it is opened to the public. Many handsome costumes, interesting household articles, and tools and implements of everyday life were added to the materials on display in the society's museum during the past year.

Of importance for an understanding of Indian life in the Minnesota region is the valuable collection of Chipewewa medicine society materials acquired recently. Included are medicine bags of otter, mink, and weasel skins, charms, beaded ceremonial bibs, and many other items significant in the ritual of the grand medicine society. As a result of its acquisition, one of the most important of the known collections of such materials can now be seen and studied in the museum of the Minnesota Historical Society.

In every department of the society an unflagging effort has been made to further its work, both routine and non-routine. The pressure of public demands upon the staff, however, plus the fact that it has not been enlarged as its work has increased, have created many difficulties. An institution of this kind does not present a picture comparable to a public library or a business office, which can put limits on its growth. The task of collecting and preserving historical records has no limit, and the work of the society is constantly increasing in volume. Accumulated records cannot be discarded as noncurrent. Each year's achievements represent just so much additional work in care and custody.

It is reasonable to suppose that with the increase of the society's treasures, there should, therefore, be a corresponding increase in the personnel to care for them. During the past twenty years the society's collections have doubled in

bulk and its work has increased in like proportion, but the professional staff is only about eight per cent larger than it was in 1920. With each passing year, therefore, the volume of unfinished work increases, and staff members dismally look forward to a time when it will overwhelm them.

An inkling of what has been accomplished is afforded by statistics showing the growth of the collections. The library catalogued 2,505 items and added 16,763 cards to the various catalogue files. In addition, the Minnesota biographical index was enlarged by 996 new cards, and 2,741 printed cards were added to the "American Genealogical Index" in the reference department. In the newspaper department great progress was made in the task of incorporating gift collections into the regular files, and in repairing and rebinding worn newspaper files. The manuscript division added 2,243 catalogue and shelf-list cards to its guides to the collections, and the museum analyzed 1,743 pictures and prepared several thousand index cards for the subject index to the picture collection. It is estimated that the accumulated index now totals nearly seventy thousand subject cards.

The Historical Records Survey, under the direction of Mr. Jacob Hodnefeld, has a substantial record of achievement for the year. Its basic work has been completed and the task of publishing in mimeographed form the results of the surveys of county archives throughout the state has been carried on at an accelerated rate. Twenty-six surveys of county archives have now been published, and the volumes make an impressive array on any library shelf. In addition, the project has issued other important publications. Among these should be mentioned a volume on the history of the Cuyuna Range, and the useful and valuable *Guide to Historic Markers* erected by the state highway department and the Minnesota Historical Society. The demand for the latter volume, in particular, has been heavy.

The society's own WPA project has performed tasks of great value during the year. Workers engaged in this project have cleaned and mended rare and valuable books, newspapers, maps, and manuscripts. They have transcribed documentary fragments which were worn by age or much use. They have inventoried and listed gift collections, calendared manuscripts, and performed a host of tasks for which the staff has not found time. The society counts the achievements of the workers on its WPA project, wholly nonroutine, as among the important accomplishments of the year.

In spite of the burden of work which has faced staff members, they have made substantial progress in individual professional activities. Dr. Nute lectured on Minnesota history throughout the school year of 1939-40 in the University of Minnesota, and since the autumn of 1940 she has served as professor of history in Hamline University. She has completed a biography of the two French explorers, Radisson and Groseilliers, has made considerable progress on a biography of Congressman Charles A. Lindbergh, and has prepared for publication in booklet form a historical study of the Basswood Lake area on the northern boundary of Minnesota. For *Minnesota History* she edited and translated a valuable series of documents, and wrote a short article about the Lindbergh bust installed in the society's building last summer. She also contributed many book reviews to this and other publications, and she delivered a number of talks and addresses before Minnesota audiences. She has served as chairman of the Alvord memorial commission of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, the annual meeting of which she attended in May, and in December she represented the society at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in New York. Mr. Babcock, besides directing the society's general WPA project, prepared for the United States Indian Service a his-

torical account of Grand Portage. He is the author of an article on the same subject which was published in *Museum News*, and he delivered a number of talks and addresses. Mrs. Berthel has devoted much of her time during the year to directing the compilation of a new and important gazetteer of Minnesota geographic names. She has nearly completed her work on the editorials of James M. Goodhue, and she is the author of an article dealing with Minnesota place names which was published in the society's magazine. Miss Heilbron prepared three articles and a book review for *Minnesota History*, and she has continued her work on Minnesota artists. During the year she made several visits to county historical museums, accounts of which were published in the society's quarterly. Mrs. Warming prepared Minnesota articles for several encyclopedias, and supplied corrections and additions to the *Union List of Serials*. Miss McCann gave a number of talks, and prepared an article, as well as many shorter notices, for publication. Dr. Beeson, who recently began his work as head of the newspaper department, has also undertaken the preparation of the articles for the *Minnesota Historical News*, and he has contributed a number of book reviews to *Minnesota History*.

A number of changes occurred in the personnel of the staff during 1940. On July 1 Miss Catherine Bauman was appointed to the position in the manuscript division formerly held by Miss Ruth Fritz, who resigned. At the end of the year Miss Helen McCann resigned her position as manuscript assistant. On February 1 Dr. Lewis Beeson was appointed acting head of the newspaper department, and on August 1 Mrs. Blanche K. Severe was provisionally appointed to the position of accessions assistant left vacant by the resignation of Mrs. Mary F. Knopp.

The deaths during the year of two members of the executive council—Mrs. Edward B. Young and Nathaniel P. Langford—both able and valued members of the society's

governing body, are recorded with regret. The two vacancies on the council were filled by the election of Miss Laura Furness of St. Paul and of the superintendent.

In planning the needs of the society for the next biennium, the executive committee submitted to the state department of administration for consideration by the legislature a budget requesting \$53,420 for each year of the biennium. This figure provides for \$35,920 for salaries and \$17,500 for supplies and expenses. The estimate is based upon a careful study of the actual basic needs of the society. It includes a request for funds to cover the salary of an archives assistant, since it is apparent that some provision must be made for adequate help in administering non-current state records in the custody of the society. During the past year well over a thousand readers have consulted these records, many of which are fragile. Surely it is appropriate that the state provide for their care. The budget also calls for salary adjustments in keeping with the recently announced civil service schedules of salaries, and it provides a small sum for services not included in the regular payroll. So far as the items for supplies and expenses are concerned, the budget request provides only for the normal minimum needs of the society.

ARTHUR J. LARSEN

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ST. PAUL



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).