

THE 1941 ANNUAL MEETING OF THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A LOCAL HISTORY conference designed to meet the needs of local historical workers in Minnesota, a luncheon program which commemorated the centennial of the founding of St. Paul, and an evening session at which the annual address was presented were the features of the ninety-second annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, held in St. Paul on January 20. For the opening session — the twenty-first in a series of local history conferences — more than sixty people, including representatives of fifteen local historical societies, assembled in the auditorium of the Historical Building at 10:00 A.M. Presiding was the president of the Nicollet County Historical Society, Mr. Henry N. Benson of St. Peter, who began the meeting by calling upon the Reverend Benno Watrin of Ponsford for an invocation. This was given in the musical language of the Chippewa, among whom Father Watrin is stationed.

The first speaker on the conference program, Mr. Willoughby M. Babcock, curator of the state historical society's museum, took as his subject "The Role of the Museum in Historical Society Work." He expressed his conviction that the museum should be "but one of the co-ordinate parts of a historical society, with a function as definite as that of the library." He noted that in the case of the Minnesota Historical Society the collecting and preserving of the materials for the study of state history are divided among the library, the manuscript division, and the museum, and the student engaged in research is advised to use the resources of all. That certain "collecting limits" should be defined by every society, was emphasized by the speaker; inappropriate and irrelevant objects should be declined.

“The desire to establish a museum which will depict the past of a community is the first manifestation of the historical consciousness of a locality,” said Mr. Babcock. After it begins to collect objects and pictures, such a museum inevitably attracts also “diaries, letters, books, newspapers, maps, and other types of historical material demanded by the true historian for his study of community life and culture.” Each local historical museum is a “focal point for the collection of material that might otherwise be lost,” and as such it should be given every encouragement.

What the local historical society can do to foster and sponsor the observance of community anniversaries was the subject discussed by the second speaker, Mr. Dana W. Frear, vice-president of the Hennepin County Historical Society. He noted that sixty-six of Minnesota's eighty-seven counties have passed their seventy-fifth anniversaries, and that only one county, Lake of the Woods, can still look forward to its twenty-fifth birthday. Communities that stage anniversary celebrations gain in historical consciousness, and they usually ferret out much historical material that might otherwise be lost. Such material often is discovered in the memory of a pioneer, or in manuscript and other records that are deteriorating through neglect. The speaker asserted that a knowledge of the past of a county would be useful not only to its average citizens, but to its officials, for if they are familiar with the mistakes of the past, they will be less likely to repeat them. The anniversary celebration, with its attendant gathering of the materials from which the story of the county can be written, is one method through which the county historical society can stimulate interest in history. Those who participate in such a celebration will become aware of other activities of the local historical society and will have opened up for them a new and stimulating field of interest.

The next speaker, Mr. Stanley W. Jacobson, chief of the

research and records section of the Minnesota WPA, explained the relationship of "The Local Historical Society and Federal Projects." He told of various local historical projects that are being conducted under WPA auspices—the inventory of county archives, a survey of historic sites, the listing of historic markers, and numerous special studies under preparation by workers engaged in the state-wide writers' project. He announced that many local historical museums have been provided with workers through the WPA.

The formal conference program was brought to a close with a discussion of "The Local Historical Society and Local Archives" by Dr. Grace Lee Nute, curator of manuscripts for the state historical society. That the local historical society is better equipped than any other agency for the preservation of the business papers of the county and the township is the contention of Dr. Nute, for, she asserts, "it is important not only to save local archives, but to save them near at hand." First of all, local historical workers should learn where the local archives are, and then they should arouse public sentiment to an appreciation of the need for preserving these papers. For the latter purpose, fireproof buildings or vaults are needed. How and by whom will the records be used? In considering these questions, Dr. Nute called attention to the need for proof of age, citizenship, and residence that so many people are encountering today. "If local communities preserve their records and organize and index them," she said, "it will be the simplest thing imaginable to prove one's age and citizenship." She told also how local records have been used by writers of fiction and biography. "How do you know," Dr. Nute asked, "that in 1990 someone will not be hunting for material in your local archives about a boy or girl who now is quite inconspicuous?" For the job of preserving those archives, she repeated in closing, no organization is

so well fitted as the local historical society, and she expressed the hope that the Minnesota societies "will not let their generation down."

Among those who participated in the discussion of the papers presented before the conference were the Honorable Victor E. Lawson of Kandiyohi County, Mr. S. S. Beach of McLeod County, Mr. Jacob Hodnefield of the Minnesota Historical Records Survey, and the Honorable Alfred H. Nelson, a member of the legislature from Meeker County. Before the close of the session, Dr. Arthur J. Larsen, superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society, stressed the need for a formal organization of local historical society leaders to co-operate in standardizing the work of such groups. His motion, seconded by Mr. Frear, that a committee of five be named to make plans for such an organization resulted in the selection of a committee consisting of Mr. Ira C. Oehler, president of the state society, Mr. Benson, Mr. Lawson, Mr. Beach, and Mrs. B. T. Willson of the Olmsted County society.

The building of a little log chapel on the present site of St. Paul in 1841 is looked upon as the event that marked the founding of the city, and the luncheon program was arranged to commemorate its centennial. Co-operating with the historical society in planning the noon meeting was the St. Paul Association of Commerce. Nearly five hundred people were present when the session convened at the St. Paul Athletic Club at 12:15 P. M. Mr. Walter F. Seeger, president of the association, opened with some remarks about that organization, which has played a leading part in the civic life of St. Paul for seventy-four years. He then introduced Dr. Guy Stanton Ford, president of the University of Minnesota and a member of the historical society's executive council, who presided. Dr. Ford paid a tribute to the pioneers who not only established the government of Minnesota, but founded many of its institutions. He

brought out the fact that the same men who laid the foundations of the commonwealth were responsible for such pioneer institutions as the university and the historical society. Among Minnesota's pioneers were priests of the Catholic church. Their exploits, said Dr. Ford, would be described by the Most Reverend John Gregory Murray, archbishop of St. Paul, in an address on "St. Paul—A Church and a City."

The philosophy that inspired the founders of Minnesota's capital city a century ago was Archbishop Murray's theme. The military men who were sent by the federal government to the new post on the upper Mississippi had a civilizing influence on this northern area, said the speaker. Their work of establishing a cultural heritage for a new community was continued and extended by hardy pioneer clergymen who went north to minister to a civilian population clustering about Fort Snelling. He told of the visit in July, 1839, of Bishop Mathias Loras of Dubuque, and of the 185 Catholics he found living in the vicinity of the military reservation. In a very real sense that visit was a prelude to the founding of St. Paul, for upon his return to Dubuque the bishop sent a priest, Father Lucian Galtier, to the upper Mississippi. He went to serve a group that included many French and Swiss from the Canadian Red River settlements—men and women who had been driven south by flood, famine, and disappointment. About the time of Father Galtier's arrival, they were forcibly ejected from their homes on the Fort Snelling reservation, where they had been living as squatters. Some of these people established new homes on the east bank of the Mississippi, and for their use Father Galtier erected a little log chapel. He called it St. Paul, a name that in time was applied to the entire settlement. Archbishop Murray also touched upon some of the Catholic personalities who followed Father Galtier—men like Father Ravoux and Bishop Cretin—

and he noted that the little church so humbly begun at St. Paul eventually outstripped in importance its father parish at Dubuque.

To tell what manner of city St. Paul grew up to be was the task before the second speaker, Dr. Ford remarked in introducing Mrs. Grace Flandrau of St. Paul. She took as her subject "St. Paul: The Personality of a City," explaining that the community's early residents had marked it with certain characteristics that are still evident in its makeup. In her opening remarks, the speaker branded as false the philosophy of those who say we should never look back, for, she asserted, we are products of our past. How St. Paul's past was shaped by "refugees from Eutopia" on the Red River, by the "aristocratic tradition" of the fur trade, by health seekers from the East, by schoolteachers from New England, and by many other elements that have helped to mold the present was explained by Mrs. Flandrau. Her stimulating and entertaining address appears in full elsewhere in this issue of *Minnesota History*.

Following a meeting of the society's executive council and a business meeting in the office of the superintendent, an audience of more than a hundred and fifty people crowded into the auditorium of the Historical Building to hear the annual address at 8:30 P.M. It was presented by Dr. Philip D. Jordan, associate professor of history in Miami University, who dealt with an unusual phase of frontier life in a paper on "The Hutchinson Family and Musical Entertainment a Century Ago." In introducing him, Mr. Oehler, who presided, announced that the speaker would be assisted by five members of the Hamline University Choir, Russell Hammar, Shirley Hammergren, Ruth Dearstyne, Mary Locker, and Rodney Weibel, and their accompanist, Rachael Quant.

Dr. Jordan recalled that at least three of the Hutchinson brothers, John, Judson, and Asa, are significant figures in

the early history of Minnesota, for in 1855 they founded the McLeod County town that bears their name. There "liquor was forbidden, as were bowling alleys, billiard tables, or gambling devices of any type," and women enjoyed "equal rights with men . . . in all matters not restricted by law." But if in Minnesota the Hutchinsons were known chiefly as "another factor exerting itself in the great migration of the 1850's," in other parts of America and even abroad they were famous as the "most prominent troupe of family singers" of the mid-century, a period that produced "at least thirty itinerant bands." These troubadours were "ideal interpreters of American life," asserted Dr. Jordan, for "they sang about America for Americans." In their programs, they "emphasized the melodramatic, the comic and the sentimental," and they lifted "their melodious voices in the causes of temperance, abolition, and woman suffrage." The lyrics for many of their songs were original, and they wrote much of their own music.

Dr. Jordan then went on to describe a program typical of those made popular by the Hutchinsons. As he completed his account of each feature of this old-time musical program, he called upon the Hamline University singers to present a song of the type described. This they did in spirited fashion, reproducing for the audience much of the flavor and atmosphere of the entertainments that were the subject of Dr. Jordan's address. The program as a whole not only characterized the Hutchinsons, but it reflected the tastes and problems of their day, and provided a cross section of social life in the 1850's. Audiences expected such programs to open with a family song, telling of the performers' backgrounds and early life, and this the Hutchinsons did in "The Old Granite State." It was usually followed by a dramatic narrative of human tragedy, such as "The Snow Storm," and by songs based on "backwoods humor, not too rough," as illustrated by "For I Should Like

to Marry" and "Horticultural Wife." The westward trek to California and its attendant tragedies were reflected in such songs as "The Emigrant's Dying Child." Propaganda entered into the programs with temperance songs like "King Alcohol," and antislavery ditties, like the stirring "Get Off the Track," which asserted that "the car emancipation, rides majestic through the nation." The climax, said Dr. Jordan, was usually reached in a patriotic song of America, and with such a number, "Uncle Sam's Farm," he brought the program to a close. Its first verse may well be repeated here:

Of all the mighty nations in the East or in the West,
The glorious Yankee nation is the greatest and the best;
We have room for all creation, and our banner is unfurled,
With a general invitation to the people of the world.

The annual address was followed by an informal reception in the society's museum rooms, where refreshments were served. There, too, members of the audience had an opportunity to view two exhibits of Hutchinson material, both of which aroused much interest. In one case were displayed scrapbooks, pictures, posters, programs, portraits, and various other items illustrative of the musicians' interests and activities. These are among the treasured possessions of a granddaughter of Asa Hutchinson, Mrs. Fred Fournie of Savage, who generously loaned them for the occasion. The second display, consisting of some of the sheet music used by the troubadours of the 1850's, came from the large collection of similar items in Dr. Jordan's possession and was exhibited through his courtesy.

BERTHA L. HEILBRON

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](#).