

THE STATE HISTORICAL CONVENTION OF 1941

THE NINETIETH anniversary of the signing of the treaty of Traverse des Sioux, by the terms of which much of south-western Minnesota was acquired from the Indians, was fittingly marked by the Minnesota Historical Society on July 26, when a group of its members and friends toured to St. Peter and Traverse des Sioux for the nineteenth state historical convention under its auspices. Three sessions at these places were held jointly with the Nicollet County Historical Society. A fourth was held en route to St. Peter near Northfield in the Nerstrand Woods, one of the few surviving remnants of the great hardwood forest known as the Big Woods, which was part of the vast area ceded by the red men in 1851. About a hundred people, who had traveled from the Twin Cities in a chartered bus and in private cars, assembled at 10:00 A. M. for the latter session, which opened the convention. On the way to the woods, they passed through Rosemount, Farmington, Castle Rock, and Northfield, points described in a multigraphed leaflet giving "Glimpses of the History of the Route." This little guide was distributed among the tourists before their departure from St. Paul and at various stopping places along the route.

In the welcome shade of hard maple, elm, basswood, red oak, butternut, and other trees characteristic of the Big Woods, the tourists paused in midmorning for a brief program. It was presented in a grassy opening among the trees, well-hidden from a dusty country road several hundred feet away. The surroundings, said the first speaker, Dr. Walter J. Breckenridge, curator of the Minnesota Museum of Natural History, had probably changed little in the past three hundred years. He discussed the "Natural History Values

in the Nerstrand Woods," where are to be found not only trees, but shrubs, flowers, birds, mammals, and other forms of animal life that no longer exist elsewhere in the Minnesota country, and some that "are strangers to many of us from farther north, since this represents their northern limit." In these woods the ornithologist may encounter such southern birds as the cerulean warbler and the Louisiana water thrush, and the herpetologist will find the "variable but often beautiful coppery brown wood frog." In this "pitifully small remnant of the once extensive hardwoods that covered a large part of southeastern Minnesota only a few decades ago," said Dr. Breckenridge, naturalists have an "outdoor laboratory" for their studies. For that reason they are anxious to have the permanent preservation of the woods ensured.

How the Nerstrand Woods have persisted to the present as a unified wooded area was explained by the presiding officer, Mr. Carl Weicht of Northfield, president of the Rice County Historical Society. The early German and Norwegian settlers took over a tract consisting of about five thousand acres and separated somewhat from the main forested region. It was divided into timber lots and sold to a large number of settlers. Descendants of many of the original owners are among the hundred and seventy people who still own lots in the area. But many have sold their holdings and the timber has been cut, thus reducing the area to something under fifteen hundred acres. If this remnant could be permanently preserved, Mr. Weicht pointed out, it would be easily accessible to sixty per cent of the people now living in Minnesota.

The Big Woods as a whole played an important role in the early history of southern Minnesota, and their significance to the pioneers was brought out by the second speaker, Mr. Willoughby M. Babcock, curator of the museum of the state historical society. He took as his subject "A Trip

through the Big Woods in the 1850's," drawing upon the narratives of travelers of the period for contemporary pictures of conditions in the area. The writers were correspondents of early Minnesota newspapers, and their accounts were discovered in files of these papers in the society's possession. The first, who wrote from Faribault, went into the Big Woods country in December, 1855, with a party that included John, Judson, and Asa Hutchinson, three members of a famous singing troupe. The anonymous writer pictured the settlements in the southern part of the Big Woods, giving special attention to the Root River Valley, where he saw "some of the finest natural scenery to be found in the Territory." Another correspondent was Dr. C. L. Anderson of St. Anthony, a local scientist, who listed many of the varieties of trees he saw in the Big Woods and discussed the geology of the region. He predicted that "at some future day our richest farms will be in these woods," but remarked that the "greatest objection at present is the superabundance of timber." A third writer told of a trip through the woods to the Crow River in midwinter. After Mr. Babcock concluded his reading of extracts from these accounts, Mr. Weicht thanked Mr. Clarence Nohman, owner of the tract of land on which the meeting had been held, for making available this charming and appropriate assembly ground.

Through Cannon City, Faribault, Morristown, and Le Center, the motor caravan proceeded from Nerstrand Woods to St. Peter, where about a hundred and seventy-five people gathered for a luncheon at the Hotel Nicollet. Dr. Arthur J. Larsen, superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society, who presided, called first upon Mr. Cyril W. Plattes, executive secretary to the commissioner of conservation. This speaker continued the discussion of the Big Woods theme, defining the area, describing its characteristics, and outlining the history of Minnesota's long struggle to save Nerstrand Woods. He announced that "an organized

effort is under way, at last, to acquire Nerstrand Woods as an inviolate State-owned natural history sanctuary and recreational area." What seems to be a workable plan has now been drawn up, said Mr. Plattes; it provides that the federal government will "purchase Nerstrand Woods, then exchange it for state land in Chippewa and Superior National Forests." In developing his subject, the speaker pointed out that the very fertility of the soil in the Big Woods area "proved its undoing," for most of the land in this section of Minnesota was cleared—the "great trees crashed, and in their places appeared grain fields, and livestock pastures, and farmsteads, villages, cities." This agricultural transformation was accompanied by another development, said Dr. Larsen in introducing the second speaker on the luncheon program, Dr. Merrill Jarchow of the South Dakota State College at Brookings. In order to display the fruits of their labors, Minnesota settlers arranged county and state fairs at a very early date, and these expositions were discussed by Dr. Jarchow. Since his paper appears in full elsewhere in this issue of *Minnesota History*, it is unnecessary to review his remarks here. Before the noon meeting adjourned, Mr. C. B. Thomas, president of the Pipestone Civic and Commerce Association, extended to the society an invitation to visit his community in connection with the state historical convention of 1942. In responding, Dr. Larsen assured Mr. Thomas that a future meeting would have for its objective the historic Pipestone Quarry, about which a national park now centers.

For the afternoon session, which was held a mile from St. Peter on the prairie overlooking the Minnesota River where the treaty negotiations of July, 1851, were conducted, more than five hundred people assembled at 3:00 P. M. The program was opened by Mr. Henry N. Benson, president of the Nicollet County Historical Society, who introduced the presiding officer, Mr. Ira C. Oehler of St. Paul, president of

the state historical society. He called first upon the Honorable Julius A. Schmahl, state treasurer, for a few remarks about life at old Traverse des Sioux. There, the speaker informed the audience, he was born seventy-four years ago, and there he experienced both the hardships and the excitement of frontier life.

Mr. Oehler next introduced the main speaker of the afternoon, the Honorable Harold E. Stassen, governor of Minnesota. He opened his discussion of "Traverse des Sioux Yesterday and Today" by observing that the study of history adds to the richness of life and by complimenting the Minnesota Historical Society on its energetic work in preserving the records of the state's backgrounds. It is difficult to realize that only ninety years ago the Minnesota Valley had not yet been opened to settlement, the Governor remarked. He reminded his audience that its rapid development may be attributed in large part to the facts that the pioneers who settled there lived under a free government and practiced a free economy. He then went on to describe the events that transpired on this meeting ground of whites and Indians four and a half decades ago. For his detailed and colorful account, he drew upon the writings of two men who were present and who left reliable records of what they saw and heard at Traverse des Sioux—James M. Goodhue, editor of Minnesota's first newspaper, and Frank B. Mayer, an artist from Baltimore. The Governor described living conditions in the camp of thirty white men—government commissioners, traders, missionaries, and the like—who went to the Traverse for the treaty, and in the lodges of the thousands of Sioux who gathered there to cede their ancient hunting grounds. He told of the native ball games and dances with which the red men entertained the whites, of the quantities of beef and pork devoured by the Indians, of the elaborate costumes in which they appeared before the commissioners. Governor Stassen concluded by reviewing

the terms of the treaty and describing the response that the news of its conclusion inspired among waiting Minnesotans. The Governor's address will be made available for a wider audience by its publication in a future issue of this magazine.

Following this program, many of the visitors made a tour of St. Peter, viewing locations of interest suggested by Mr. Benson. Included were the houses occupied by five governors who resided in the community—Willis A. Gorman, Henry A. Swift, Horace Austin, Andrew R. McGill, and John A. Johnson. The tourists also visited the campus of Gustavus Adolphus College, the grounds of the St. Peter State Hospital, and the square where ambitious St. Peter pioneers erected a building intended for use as the Minnesota capitol.

The final session of the one-day tour followed a dinner at 6:00 P. M. in the air-cooled dining room of the Cook Hotel. Mr. Benson, who presided, first called upon Judge Julius E. Haycraft of Fairmont to present to the audience of about a hundred and fifty people some of his "Personal Recollections of St. Peter." Many of the speakers' memories were connected with his marriage to the daughter of a local pioneer. He told, too, of the newspapermen, physicians, lawyers, and other local celebrities whom he came to know during his frequent visits to St. Peter.

The principal address of the evening was presented by Mrs. Grace Flandrau of St. Paul, who chose as her subject "Makers of History in the Minnesota Valley." Woven into her story were such French names as Pierre Charles le Sueur, Joseph Renville, and J. N. Nicollet. When she turned to the founding of St. Peter, the speaker exploited the prominent role in its development that was played by her father-in-law, Charles E. Flandrau. She told how this young lawyer of French descent helped to select the site of the community for the St. Peter Company, how he removed from St. Paul to the new settlement and practiced law there,

how he served as a member of the Minnesota constitutional convention and later of the state supreme court. She then turned to his military career, describing his participation in the expeditions against the Sioux in 1857 and 1862, and giving special attention to his leadership in the defense of New Ulm. Flandrau's private life, too, was the subject of comment by the speaker, who closed by describing the house he built in St. Paul—the house that she still occupies. It is filled, she told the audience, with mementos of the Sioux War and of her father-in-law's life in St. Peter.

Following Mrs. Flandrau's intimate and fascinating review of the career of a St. Peter pioneer, Mr. Benson informed the audience that descendants and relatives of a number of the city's other prominent early residents were among those present. He then introduced Miss Helen Austin and her brother Herbert of St. Paul, a daughter and a son of Governor Austin, and Mr. Fred W. Johnson of New Ulm, a brother of Governor Johnson. Messages were read from descendants of Governors Swift and McGill, and from Miss Laura Furness, a granddaughter of Governor Ramsey. Since the latter was present at Traverse des Sioux in 1851, the city of St. Peter has a special interest in him, Mr. Benson said. These reminders that the nineteenth state historical convention had centered about Minnesota's "City of Governors" brought the meeting to a close. B. L. H.



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](#).