

The Minnesota Historical Society in 1943¹

Lewis Beeson

IN THE ANNUAL REPORT presented to the society a year ago, I stressed the need for adapting its activities to the changing conditions wrought by the war and I described some of the changes then in progress. These changes have continued. The most marked is in the number of visitors to the Historical Building. The decrease in attendance already apparent in 1942, the first year of the war, continued in 1943. From a total of approximately 40,000 in 1941, the number of museum visitors dropped to 35,000 in 1942 and to 21,200 in 1943. Only 816 readers used the facilities of the newspaper division in 1943, as compared with 2,205 in 1942 and 3,393 in 1941. The library served 2,456 readers during the past year, a decided drop from 3,818 in 1942 and 6,307 in 1941. The number of readers in the manuscript division decreased from 7,867 in 1942 to 4,020 in 1943, a figure still well above the 1941 total of 3,165, however, because of the continued demand for information from the census records.

Changes in personnel, while not so numerous as in the first year of the war, have still been greater than in previous years. The assistant in the newspaper division, Mr. Edward Werneke, left to enter defense work, and was replaced by Mr. Edwin Blomgren. Miss Ida Kramer and Miss Mary Spring resigned as assistants in the manuscript division, and were succeeded by Miss Eileen Longbotham and Miss Helen Gladoski. Mrs. Mary McKenney was transferred from the manuscript division to the catalogue department to replace Miss Esther Johnson, who was promoted to the position of assistant catalogue left vacant by the resignation of Mrs. Leone Brower. Another resignation in the catalogue department was that of Mrs. Muriel Unger, catalogue typist, who has not yet been replaced. Leo Malack

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resigned as library page to enter military service, and Alvin Krengle, assistant page, was promoted to the position of page.

In the general office personnel changes were especially numerous. Mrs. Florence Trelogan, chief clerk, resigned, and was succeeded by Mrs. Phyllis Sandstrom. Miss Helen Carlson was appointed general office stenographer after the resignation of Mrs. Mary Burda. The position of clerk typist in the office was held successively by Miss Therese Aberwald, Miss Mary Ann Fronts, and Miss Adeline Levenson; and there have been three successive general office assistants — Earl Draeger, Richard Hackman, and Mark Lindemann. In September Robert Vik was added to the staff as an additional office assistant.

The annual meeting held on January 18, 1943, was confined to two sessions instead of the four held heretofore—a luncheon meeting and a business session in the afternoon. The usual summer tour was omitted, but the society collaborated with the Washington County Historical Society in celebrating the centennial of Stillwater on August 21. Mr. Willoughby M. Babcock, curator of the museum, represented the society on the program. At an open meeting of the society's executive council on April 19, Mrs. F. R. Bigelow of St. Paul gave an illustrated talk on the history of old Prairie du Chien.

The number of talks and papers given by staff members before various groups and organizations was small in comparison with pre-war years. Most of them were presented in the Twin Cities or near by, although the acting superintendent traveled as far as Prairie du Chien and, later, to Winona to represent the society at meetings.

The collections of the society, built up year by year through careful planning, constant vigilance, and persistent effort, continue to grow. During the past year 1,722 books and 630 pamphlets, of which nearly sixty-three per cent were acquired by gift, were added to the library. Among the additions to the library's map collection were a photostat of a rare 1856 map of St. Anthony and *A New and Correct Map of the Whole World*, by Herman Moll, published in London in 1719. The Monument and the Old Trails chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution gave several volumes as memorials to Mrs. Marshall Coolidge and Mrs. James T. Morris, and the United

Daughters of the Confederacy continued its gifts of volumes on Southern history. The society now has a library of 186,064 volumes, and 22,347 bound volumes of newspapers. The newspaper volumes added to the collections during 1943 numbered 721. Among the gifts received were a number of papers published at military camps. The collection of temperance papers was enriched by two issues for 1872 of the *Western Temperance Herald*, published in Minneapolis.

Outstanding among the 136 manuscript collections acquired in 1943 were records of the Marine lumbering firm of Judd, Walker, and Company; sixty-seven film-slide rolls of correspondence of the Michigan superintendency of Indian affairs and of subordinate agencies from 1819 to 1851, all rich in Minnesota material; and some papers of William Windom, United States senator from Minnesota from 1871 to 1881 and secretary of the treasury under Garfield and Harrison, presented by his grandson, Mr. Roger Windom of Orlando, Florida.

Among the 324 gifts received for the society's museum may be mentioned four decorations presented to the late E. H. Hobe of St. Paul by the Norwegian and Swedish governments; a Jefferson Indian medal, received from an anonymous donor; an unusual and beautiful square piano of rosewood with a mother-of-pearl keyboard, the gift of Mrs. Louis W. Hill, Sr., of St. Paul; a large Swedish loom complete with fittings; and a number of additions to the military collection. Sixteen hundred and eighty-nine pictures were added to the picture collection, which now numbers 71,746 items.

Volume 24 of *Minnesota History*, the society's quarterly magazine, appeared in 1943. In its 385 pages are presented fifty-one articles and book reviews contributed by forty-one authors, including a number of widely known historians. Six of the contributors are members of the society's staff. The subject matter of the volume is varied, with articles concerned with community history, biography, cultural history of national groups, agricultural history, and Indian battles and uprisings, to mention a few. A hundred and forty-three pages of the volume are devoted to notes about items of historical interest. An important task completed during the year was the consolidation on

cards, by Mrs. Ilse Levi, of the indexes for volumes 11 to 20 of *Minnesota History*. The index would make a volume of about two hundred pages — a volume that would be extremely valuable to all students of Minnesota and Northwest history. It is to be hoped that the funds for its publication will soon be available. In addition to the four issues of the magazine, the society published eleven issues of the *Minnesota Historical News*, a clipsheet which supplies the newspapers of the state with stories of local historical interest.

The routine duties which consume by far the greater part of the staff members' time — locating and acquiring new materials for the society's collections, preparing exhibits, waiting on the public, answering requests for information by mail and telephone, recording new accessions, cataloguing, arranging and rearranging collections, filing, making indexes, and otherwise caring for the collections and making them available to the public — these have been carried on diligently and efficiently throughout the year.

Several staff members have been engaged in scholarly and professional activities in addition to their regular duties. Miss Nute prepared three articles which appeared in two periodicals, gave three addresses before various groups, and wrote a book on Lake Superior which is now in the hands of the publishers. Her book on Radisson and Des Groseilliers, *Caesars of the Wilderness*, appeared in March. She has been awarded a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship to write a book on the Minnesota iron ranges, and she has been asked to serve on the editorial board of the Society of American Archivists. Mr. Babcock, besides preparing an address for the Stillwater centennial celebration, wrote an article for publication in the *Conservation Volunteer*. Mr. Hodnefield addressed a meeting of the Washington County Historical Society and judged a school speaking contest. Miss Heilbron wrote an article for publication in *Minnesota History* and prepared the introduction and annotations for another, which was reprinted from an early Minnesota periodical. Miss Jerabek was president of the Twin City Catalogers' Round Table and of the University of Minnesota division of library instruction alumni association, she served on a committee of the Minnesota Library Association, and she contributed an article to *Minnesota History*. The acting superin-

tendent gave four addresses during the year and published an article in the *Minnesota Journal of Education*.

A serious loss has been suffered in the deaths of Edward C. Gale and William H. Bovey, members of the executive council and devoted friends of the society. The membership of the society, which a year ago amounted in all classes to 1,558, now has reached 1,609, exactly what it was at the end of 1941. This is an encouraging gain because the dislocations brought about by the war have caused many memberships to be dropped. The society, however, has not yet reached all the people who should be interested in it. The total membership should be ten times what it is now.

When I stated a year ago that institutions which do not adapt themselves to war conditions will have difficulty in surviving, I had no fear that the Minnesota Historical Society would not meet the test. As a matter of fact, the role the society has to play in wartime is as important as that which it plays in peacetime, for, as Dr. Larsen told you in his last report, "a knowledge of history, which, in time of peace is a useful tool, in time of war becomes a powerful weapon."

The war, indeed, has created an increasing interest in local history. I am sure that all of you are familiar with the discussion that has taken place in the past eighteen months with respect to the teaching of American history in the public schools. It was opened when the *New York Times* reported that a nationwide survey showed "that 82% of the institutions of higher learning in the United States do not require the study of United States history for the undergraduate degree." The newspaper deplored this situation. A knowledge of United States history, it said, helps develop good citizens, teaches the American way of life, builds civic responsibility, develops good leadership, helps the citizen to appreciate his American heritage, and gives the American boys fighting against fascism a clearer insight into the democratic traditions they are defending.

As a result of the widespread interest created by the report of the *New York Times*, a committee on American history in the schools and colleges, headed by Dr. Edgar Wesley of the University of Minnesota, tested the knowledge of American history held by selected groups and came to the conclusion that "Americans do not

know their history as well as they might." The report of this committee, which has just been published, advocates "an extensive program for the improvement of the teaching of American history in the schools and colleges of this country" and recommends a revision of the history courses now offered in elementary and high schools.

I do not believe that this society, or any organization not connected directly with our educational system, should attempt to decide how much, or in what grades, or in what manner American history should be taught in our schools. These are matters that teachers and educators should determine. Nevertheless, the society cannot and should not remain indifferent to the question raised by the *New York Times* and to the answers supplied by the committee of historians and educators.

The history of Minnesota is American history. Civic responsibility stems directly from a knowledge and understanding of the present as interpreted by the past. It is important that our citizens should know more about their own history. Our enemies have set about deliberately to split our people into various groups, religious and racial. We must continue to acquaint the people of this state with their common history. We must continue to develop in each national group a sense of the importance of its contributions to the state. We must continue, above all, to make each group familiar with the contributions of other groups. We should seek to break down differences, not to accentuate them.

To familiarize the people of the state with the history of their commonwealth and with the contributions made by its many nationalities has been one of the society's primary aims. Through talks and addresses by member of the staff, through the publication of books and articles prepared by staff members and by scholars, journalists, novelists, and the like, through a program of co-operation with the state's schools and with a network of sixty local historical societies, and through other means, the society has made an important contribution to interracial goodwill and understanding on the part of Minnesota's many foreign groups. This contribution, although it cannot be measured or weighed, is a real and effective force in Minnesota's war effort today. There can be no doubt that

the work of the society has contributed in no small measure to the magnificent unity of the various racial elements in this state in the pursuit of the war and to the failure of German propaganda to create disunity among us. A knowledge of history is a tool of war.

Thus the society, I believe, has demonstrated that it has a vital part to play in wartime. By means of its publications and by disseminating in other ways a knowledge of our institutions and their history, it has helped to create among the people of Minnesota a willingness to sacrifice for the common good. It has made very tangible contributions to the war effort by furnishing citizens with information which enables them to prove age, residence, or citizenship, by collecting and preserving records and other material relating to the activities of Minnesotans in the war, and by helping businesses and other organizations to obtain information of use in their wartime activities.

It is not, however, with the society's adaptation to wartime conditions that I am primarily concerned. It is the society's adaptation to the postwar world that concerns me most at present.

In the 1920's and 1930's this society blazed the way in developing both the specialized techniques of historical society activity and methods of increasing public interest in and knowledge of state history. Since 1913 an effective organization has been built up, a highly skilled staff has been trained, and research and scholarship have been made dominant in the society's work. At the same time its activities were broadened by establishing its magazine, founding local historical societies, conducting summer tours, publishing books on various phases of state history, and supplying newspapers with monthly news stories. The study of local history was introduced in the schools. A series of radio talks in 1932 and 1933 demonstrated how useful a medium the radio could be in popularizing history. In the period from 1915 to 1940, the scientific approach and the popularizing of state history were added to the already established programs of publication and accumulation inaugurated by the society's members and council in its earlier years.

The society is ninety-four years old. We are proud, and justly so, of the fact that it is the oldest institution in Minnesota. For a gen-

eration it has held a position of leadership among state historical societies. But leadership does not come automatically. We cannot rest upon our oars. We cannot remain content with tradition and prestige. We cannot rely upon age to protect us from the vicissitudes which time will bring. No institution can remain stationary. It goes either forward or backward.

In the postwar period the society will be judged increasingly by the service it renders to the people of the state. It is only right that an institution supported largely by legislative appropriations should be so judged. More demands will be made upon the society, and more services will be expected of it, though the normal growth of present activities will place a greater burden upon the staff. The society must increase its effectiveness in bringing to the people of Minnesota a knowledge and an understanding of their past so that they may better control their future.

In what ways can the society enlarge and extend its service to the people of Minnesota? First of all, it needs to continue its present activities. It is certain that the society cannot cease collecting material. There must be trained librarians to select new books and pamphlets and to catalogue them, and to aid and direct the public in their use. New manuscript material must be arranged and catalogued. Pictures and museum articles must be arranged, catalogued, and properly displayed. The society must maintain a trained staff sufficiently large to give its collections adequate care and to make them available to the public.

Research and scholarship must continue. Of what value is the building up of collections of books, newspapers, manuscripts, and museum objects if no use is made of them? It is true that writers, novelists, newspapermen, and students would use the collections, but if the society did not have a staff trained in historical research methods, familiar with its resources, and capable of advising and assisting those who visit its building, the latter would find our great storehouse of information a locked treasury.

Publication must continue. Through the magazine, *Minnesota History*, the society fulfills one of its essential functions—that of making the people of the state familiar with their history. This fun-

damental purpose of the society also is accomplished through the publication of such books as the *Journal* of Henry Lewis, the *Diary* of Frank B. Mayer, the *Letters* of Mrs. Swisshelm, the *Minnesota Farmers' Diaries*, and the *Voyageur's Highway*, and of a clipsheet, the *Minnesota Historical News*. Through manuals and guides like *Copying Manuscripts*, the *Care and Cataloguing of Manuscripts*, the *Bibliography of Minnesota Territorial Documents*, the *Guide to the Personal Papers* in its manuscript collections, and the volume of *Documents Relating to Northwest Missions* recently published for the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, as well as through its quarterly and the other publications mentioned, the society describes the techniques it has developed, makes known its resources, and makes available basic source materials. The dual purpose of its publications—popularization and scholarship—should be continued.

The work of scholarship and the task of expressing the fruits of research in language that the general public will understand requires a trained staff with time to discover, assimilate, and express new knowledge about the history of the state. Essential, therefore, to the proper functioning of the society is a staff large enough to care for the routine tasks of administration, custody, and service to the public, and still to have time for research and writing. Thus it is unfortunate that in recent years there has been no increase in the size of the professional staff, for this means that the expanding demands of routine have left its members with less time for research and writing. This is a serious problem for which we must seek a solution either through an appeal to the legislature or by otherwise increasing the society's income.

We must find ways to publish. As it is, several staff members have manuscripts in preparation or completed which, if published in book form, would make available to students and to the general public additional knowledge about the state. Through the public-spirited interest of one member of the society, who advanced funds to cover the cost, one of the society's most popular publications, *The Voyageur's Highway*, was made possible. Surely there are other members who could be interested in helping the society publish some of the manuscripts it has ready.

The society's program for the popularization of Minnesota history is fundamentally strong. It is worthy of support by its members, by the legislature, and by others. We need only to build upon what we have. But we must expand and develop this program. We should seek to put the society again on the air with a radio program. In fact, such a program is now under consideration. In view of the current interest in the teaching of American history, the society should extend its efforts to make available to schools material on the history of the state. It should stimulate and direct the interest of teachers and students in Minnesota history, it should give publicity to successful local history projects inaugurated by individual teachers, and it should make teachers fully aware of the value that a knowledge of local history has in the child's development.

Steps already have been taken to extend the society's activities in relation to the schools. In October the executive committee authorized the society's president, Dr. Lester B. Shippee, to appoint a committee to consider methods for better co-operation with the schools. A staff member, Miss Alma Jensen, has devoted considerable time recently to formulating a program which would place the society in closer contact with the schools. Miss Bertha Heilbron, the assistant editor of *Minnesota History*, is planning for that magazine a new series on "Minnesota History and the Schools." Teachers will be invited to contribute to the series articles about successful experiments in the teaching of local history.²

Wartime restrictions on travel have curtailed greatly the number of students and adults who visit the Historical Building to view exhibits. To combat this tendency, we should make more extensive use of our museum and other collections. In order to attract more visitors to the society's building, the customary rotation of exhibits in the cases should be continued. In addition, we might invite various groups to display articles illustrative of their experiences in Minnesota. Very interesting exhibits could be made up of material relating to the many groups that form Minnesota's population. The society could supplement from its own resources the material col-

² The first article in this series, in which a community project developed at Milaca is described by Mr. Leslie E. Westin of Stillwater, appears *post*, p. 57.

lected and brought to the Historical Building for display by such groups. Plans are being made for the rotation of picture exhibits. The society's vast picture collection will provide material for an indefinite number of changes. But exhibits should not be confined to the society's own collection; we should also invite exhibits of material owned by others. You are witnessing the first of these—a display of Miss Josephine Lutz's water colors of old Stillwater, a permanent record of that city's architectural beauty and of one phase of its cultural heritage. By displaying these pictures, the society not only has added an attractive feature to its annual meeting, but it has given recognition to a Minnesota artist for her contribution to the cause of state and local history.

The use of collections may be extended also by sending selected exhibits out into the state. Since schools in particular would benefit from this practice, the society's school committee is planning loan exhibits that can be sent to schools throughout the state. But other organizations also, such as local historical societies, might well be stimulated and helped by loan exhibits from the state society, which in turn might use loans from them.

The selection and preparation of material for exhibit purposes outside the building, however, raises questions of some intricacy and delicacy. Much of our material is not available for use outside the building because it has been placed here for permanent preservation. The task of preparing exhibits is considerable. Yet it is possible, I believe, to make a start in providing exhibits for schools, local historical societies, and other responsible institutions.

The society's accumulation of valuable historical material, whether it consists of museum objects, pictures, manuscripts, maps, newspapers, books, pamphlets, or documents, has become so vast that the space available for its safekeeping has been fully utilized. The Historical Building, which twenty-five years ago had much reserve space, is now completely filled. A solution for the problem of space must be found within a few years. Although the problem is evident in every department, it is particularly acute in the museum. The exhibit halls are overcrowded, though about ninety-eight per

cent of the museum material is not on display, and the storage rooms are filled to capacity.

These factors make desirable a review of the society's policy with respect to the acquisition of material. Perhaps we should be more selective than we have been in the past. Perhaps we should consider greater specialization with respect to the museum articles we now possess. This could be obtained through the development of branch museums, such as the Round Tower Museum at Fort Snelling, in which military objects are displayed. I see possibilities for the eventual development of branch museums in the fields of transportation, agricultural implements, and medicine, which would enable the society to segregate its material in those fields and to utilize it as a nucleus about which to build up new collections in particular fields.

The questions here raised are so important that the executive committee at its October meeting authorized Dr. Shippee to appoint a committee to advise with the staff and the executive committee on the collection, exhibition, use, and loan of museum and other material. Under the chairmanship of Miss Laura Furness, it has met and is at work.

The stimulation of interest in local history through the development of local historical societies should continue. Many of the local societies have accumulated valuable collections, have opened museum rooms, and have obtained the services of volunteer or paid workers. These societies have reached a stage of development which requires from the state society more in the way of advice and assistance than it has been able to furnish in the past. We should ask the next legislature to provide funds for a trained field worker to help local societies solve the many problems they are encountering.

Interest in local history may be stimulated through the celebration of anniversaries. Since many Minnesota communities are nearing their centennials, this interest will increase rather than decrease. The society should take the initiative well in advance of an anniversary by organizing dignified and worthwhile observances of local historic events. By calling the attention of communities to their anniversaries,

by offering to advise and assist local historical societies and civic organizations in planning for celebrations, and by helping to provide speakers and collect material for exhibits, the society can serve local communities with great effectiveness.

What the society can do to serve the people of Minnesota is limited by its present resources, which, in terms of staff and space, are now being fully utilized. Yet within the means at our disposal we should seek in every way to extend the society's service. We must utilize its prestige, its training, and its experience to give the people of Minnesota a wider knowledge of their history.



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