

# Minnesota History and the Schools

## PIONEER REUNIONS IN ST. LOUIS COUNTY

*Benjamin G. Leighton*

IN ST. LOUIS COUNTY in northern Minnesota, during a five-year period from 1938 to 1942, twenty-eight rural communities conducted pioneer reunions with the co-operation of the rural school system and the county superintendent of schools, Mr. Arthur Lampe. Under the leisure education department, which supervises all work of a recreational, athletic, social, and cultural nature, these community events originated and developed. Through them the past, present, and future of each community was effectively depicted. Its history, the accomplishments of its people, the hardships they endured together, traditions, tragedies, comedies, romances, and relations with and contributions to other communities, the state, the nation, and even the world at large were brought to light and dramatized.

The pioneer reunions were found to have a place in a wartime as well as a peace-time program, for they gave definite recognition to the servicemen and women, whether they were absent or at home on furlough. These men and women are the pioneers of a new world now developing. In honoring its old settlers and its new pioneers, a community honors itself, takes on new life, and acquires a sense of well-being that is wholesome and stimulating.

Gatherings to honor pioneers or pioneer occasions have been held in the United States for many generations. They have become identified with the traditions and the folklore of many American areas. In St. Louis County, which was opened and settled scarcely more than fifty years ago, historical material was not difficult to assemble. Many of the original pioneers are still living in the communities they helped to found; many others could be located and brought back for the celebration. In many cases, the pioneer reunion involved the first attempt to gather historical data and preserve records for future use.

When a pioneer reunion was planned in a St. Louis County community, at least one year was allowed for preparation. This much time is needed in order that the celebration can "grow," and become thoroughly understood and deeply rooted in the life of the community. Furthermore, it takes considerable time to prepare the various features, to secure the necessary historical data, to communicate with pioneers living elsewhere, and to line up effective programs. A community leader from the St. Louis County leisure education department worked with the teachers in the local school and the residents of the community to plan the event. A community old settlers' celebration association, established for the occasion, often became a permanent organization.

The association was made up of representatives of every local group—junior as well as adult—and as many people as possible were assigned to work on committees or given responsibilities and duties. Emphasis was placed upon respect and reverence for the objectives of the celebration, and everyone was made to feel that it was a privilege to serve without receiving individual credit or recognition for his part in the organization and its plans. The reunion was conducted on its own merits, and not as an auxiliary of some other event such as a county fair or even a historical society meeting. The money, service, facilities, and effort needed to make the pioneer reunion a success were easily obtained because, like all the activities of the leisure education department of the St. Louis County schools, these celebrations were developed on a "self-helping, self-teaching, self-motivating, self-supporting, and self-governing" basis under intelligent guidance.

Each pioneer reunion was an occasion that will long be remembered. Teachers, members of high school classes, and others gathered historical information chiefly by interviewing old settlers; this material was utilized in a souvenir booklet, which was published and distributed in connection with the reunion. On the day of the gathering, a noonday dinner was served in the school or the community hall, with the pioneers as guests. It was followed by a program, which usually included a roll call, musical numbers, the introduction of the oldest living pioneer, the first teacher, the first child born in the com-

munity, and other interesting characters, talks on pioneer experiences by early residents of the community or of neighboring towns, and a pageant or a series of tableaux depicting early life in the locality. An exhibit of heirlooms, old pictures, and objects of historical interest was another feature of the celebration.

Some of the items that appeared in the souvenir booklets issued in connection with the St. Louis County reunions are interesting and enlightening. Most of the booklets were multigraphed. The material included sometimes was presented both in Finnish and English, for rural St. Louis County has large numbers of Finnish settlers, many of whom have never learned to read English. The Vermilion Lake booklet, which was issued in September, 1938, is dedicated to "the trail blazers and early pioneers who by their tireless labor have overcome the difficulties of living in trackless wilds, and who have seen an enterprising community develop from virgin forests where only Indians roamed, and who have set us an example of friendliness, cooperation, and goodwill." Among the items that follow the dedication are a list of thirty-seven pioneers who were still living in the township in 1938, a memorial to those who had passed away, a roster of local men who served in the First World War, an account of the days when logging and homesteading were the only occupations, and many little stories of pioneer life. One of the latter tells how Peter Peyla filed on a homestead in 1896, was lost in the wilderness for four days, and finally reached Soudan minus supplies and most of his clothes. He did not return to build on his claim for five years.

The Brookston people had exciting tales to tell of the forest fire that swept their region in 1918. Brimson, Fairbanks, Bassett, and Toimi, in the heart of the area of Finnish settlement, held a joint celebration in June, 1938. The souvenir booklet issued on this occasion under the editorship of Edwin Petrell and Hjalmer Kaikkonen was entitled *Eramaan Oras (The Desert Seedling) Memorial Number*, recalling a paper issued by a Finnish society that flourished in the vicinity from 1906 to 1914.

The Gheen bulletin includes items about a Sioux-Chippewa battle at the portage east of Gheen, and about a couple who walked from

Tower in 1904, carrying their baby and often wading "in water above their knees." Mrs. Hilma Ruohonen of the Sturgeon-Alango region north of Chisholm contributed a pathetic account of life in the northern wilderness. After she and her husband "were settled on our homestead in the beautiful nature's forest, a man whom we did not know, came to chop down our trees and hauled them away, leaving only stumps in place of virgin pine," according to Mrs. Ruohonen. After they lost "all this valuable timber," four of their five children died of scarlet fever. Her husband died after a long illness, leaving her with one son. But she asserts that "regardless of the difficulties we have experienced, I would not exchange my present home for anything anyone could offer." The humorous side of pioneer life is reflected in the story of a trip in an ox-drawn sleigh to Brimson, where a dance was in progress. "The going was slow," writes the pioneer narrator. "On the wayside stood a haystack belonging to a neighbor and despite the commands and tow-tows at the reins, the ox steered its course to the haystack. There it ate its fill before proceeding."

To serve as a guide for those interested in staging pioneer reunions, a few concrete suggestions are offered herewith. The following committees should be appointed: general arrangements, history, heirlooms and antiques, pictures, refreshments, program and music, invitations, publicity, hospitality and housing, and finance.

The committee on general arrangements should be made up of the chairmen of all other committees. It should help to organize, promote, and co-ordinate all plans, and should appoint members of other committees. From time to time it should call general meetings to check on the progress of the work. It should see that all events are smoothly, effectively, and interestingly conducted. It should also define the term "pioneer" as it applies to the home community, determining whether a residence of twenty, twenty-five, or thirty years or more is necessary in order to qualify for the pioneer status. Arrangements for the organization of a pioneer association should be made by this committee.

The history committee should collect information about the early

years of the community, the origin of its name, the names and dates of arrival of the first settlers, the beginnings of schools, churches, stores, organizations, and the like, the building of roads and railroads, and various other types of historical data. Some of this information can be gathered by interviewing early settlers, who also should be encouraged to attend the reunion and to participate by recalling their experiences. Some of the material compiled should be presented to the audience on the day of the reunion; it should be given permanent form in a printed or multigraphed program or pamphlet, which will serve as a souvenir of the occasion. In the course of its work, the history committee should co-operate with the committees on pictures, heirlooms, and invitations.

The committees on heirlooms and on pictures should locate and arrange to borrow for purposes of display heirlooms, antiques, and objects of historical interest and pictures of various kinds, including portraits, early photographs of the community, oil paintings, and the like. Many objects and pictures that reflect the early history of a community can be found in the possession of its pioneers and their descendants. Members of committees that borrow such articles must be responsible for their care, for their proper display, and for their safe return to the original owners. These committees should arrange displays to be held on the day of the pioneer reunion. Attendants should be placed in charge of such displays and should be constantly on duty. An accurate record of all articles borrowed and displayed should be kept on cards. The following information should be recorded: description of the article, name and address of owner, age of article, country of origin, and date of return to its owner. All articles borrowed for display should be returned to their owners immediately after the reunion.

The committee on refreshments may arrange for a picnic, a banquet, or a reception. The nature of the refreshments to be served will depend upon the amount of money at the disposal of the committee. It may decide in advance upon an admission charge and estimate its income accordingly. If a reception is planned, pioneer women should be invited to preside at the tea table.

The program and music committee should not only invite speakers and musicians to participate in the program, but it should work out a schedule for the entire day's activities. It should appoint a master of ceremonies, see that the program starts on time, and take care that it does not last too long. Arrangements can be made for a musical program while refreshments are being served. The music department of the local school should be invited to contribute to the musical entertainment, and pioneers or their descendants should be encouraged to perform the folk music of the lands from which they came.

The committee on invitations should locate all former residents of the community, being careful not to overlook a single pioneer, and invite them to attend the reunion. Early teachers, pastors, and other community leaders who are invited to participate in the program should be asked to reply to their invitations.

The committee on publicity should send announcements and stories about the reunion to newspapers and magazines published in the area and to local radio stations.

The hospitality committee should provide housing for all visitors, including pioneers, who attend the reunion, and should arrange to meet all such individuals as they arrive.

A record of all early settlers who attend the reunion should be kept for future reference. For this purpose an attendant should be constantly on duty during the day. He should record in a book the names and the dates of arrival in the community of all pioneers present, and if possible he should obtain their signatures. The people who sign such a roll may be among those invited to join a pioneers' association, which should be organized during the celebration. A slate of suggested officers may be prepared in advance. If possible, the president and secretary should be residents of the community.

Other features that may be arranged for a pioneer reunion program include a service in memory of pioneers who have passed away, a roll call of living pioneers, a style show of costumes typical of the early days of the community, and community singing of old popular tunes and folk songs of national groups represented in the audience.

Pioneers should be given time to recall some of their early experiences and to visit with one another. Arrangements should be made to have a photographer present throughout the day. A written record of all that takes place in connection with the pioneer reunion should be preserved for use in planning future celebrations.

The difficulties of early travel and transportation, the building of the first school, the establishment of churches, the beginnings of farming, industry, and trade, the delivery of mail, early markets, co-operative stores, and other pioneer enterprises — all were graphically and simply recalled in the St. Louis County pioneer reunions. It seems fitting to conclude this account by quoting from an address presented by the superintendent of schools at the pioneer reunion at Elmer on August 11, 1940: "Progress can be material — in terms of money, property, cleared land, roads, bridges," he said. "But there is another kind of progress — in terms of better education, citizenship, health, wholesome use of leisure time, and those intangible things which relate to the human spirit."



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](#).