

The Minnesota Historical Society in 1944¹ *Lewis Beeson*

THE MINNESOTA Historical Society was established by men interested in the future. The same men who founded this society in the infant territory of fewer than five thousand souls laid the basis for the future commonwealth of Minnesota. They constituted its political organization, determined the nature of its economic structure, and gave direction to its cultural development. They were practical men, concerned with instituting in Minnesota an organized community in which they and their children could enjoy political stability, economic security, and cultural riches.

The future, as much as the past, motivated the men who founded the society. "It may seem a strange thing," said one of them, "even to some among our own citizens, and still stranger to people, elsewhere, that a *Historical Society* should have been formed in this Territory, less than a year after its organization, when its history was apparently but a few months old, when the wilderness was as it is yet, around us, when the smoke of Indian lodges still intercepted our view of the horizon, when our very name was so new, that men disputed as to its orthography, and formed parties in contesting its literal meaning."

Yet actually there was no anomaly in establishing a historical society in the land of the future. Minnesota already had a history, said Alexander Ramsey—for it was Ramsey whom I have just quoted—a history of warring Indian tribes, French voyageurs, English fur traders, and American explorers. To recognize that such history existed, to collect, to preserve, and to make it known, Ramsey implied, "would elevate the character of our young Territory in the

¹ This report was read before the afternoon session of the ninety-sixth annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, in the Historical Building, St. Paul, on January 15, 1945. *Ed.*

eyes of friends abroad, and in the estimation of men of character and science, more than would the golden sands of California if we possessed them." If it is true that history is philosophy, teaching by example, he declared, then "historical societies may be characterized as the retorts in which the elements of that philosophy be collected and combined." Thus they provide a bridge between the past and the future.

If they function properly as cultural agencies in transforming the separate elements of our experience into that collective knowledge which enables us to utilize the past in guiding our actions in the present and in planning them for the future, historical societies must collect and preserve the records of these experiences, classify and otherwise make them available for use, and foster a knowledge of their import and meaning. Annually it is the duty and pleasure of the administrative head of this society to report to the members to what extent it has functioned in these directions during the past year. To the degree to which it has functioned effectively, the society has been the conservator of the most precious of all our resources—our cultural resources.

In its important task of increasing its collection of material relating to Minnesota's past, the society fortunately has the good will, understanding, and co-operation of the individuals who and the institutions which possess or produce records. In 1944, books and pamphlets to the number of 2,430 were added to the library; more than three-fifths were gifts. The estimated size of the library is now 188,394 items, exclusive of newspapers. All the 682 newspapers received by the society currently at the end of 1944, except one, came as gifts of the publishers. During the year, 423 volumes of newspapers were bound, increasing the size of the newspaper collection to 22,770 volumes. The number of United States documents, which technically are on deposit and hence are received free of charge, increased by 4,956. Of the 758 periodicals received currently by the library, only 107 are obtained through subscription; the rest come either as gifts or as exchanges for our publications. The number of continuations received, most of which are gifts, is 2,665.

Among the rarer items added to the library were a *Choctaw Hymn Book*, published at Boston in 1844, a gift of the late Anna Dickson of St. Paul; and an early North Dakota imprint, Charles H. Lee's *The Long Ago, A Collection of Historic Anecdotes of Early Days in the Valley of the Red River of the North*, published at Walhalla in 1899, which was purchased through the fund bequeathed to the society in 1928 by Herschel V. Jones. The society could well use more bequests like the Jones Fund. Other important additions to the library were made possible through the beneficence of the Minnesota society of the Daughters of American Colonists, the Monument and Old Trails chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Robert E. Lee chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

The museum was enriched by a number of notable gifts. A collection of 360 patriotic envelopes and 13 Confederate bonds was presented by Mrs. Charles H. Graves of Santa Barbara, California; an anonymous donor gave the society the Jefferson Peace and Friendship medal which was described by Miss Nute in an article in the September issue of *Minnesota History*; a costume collection, of special interest for the many articles of men's clothing included, was donated by Dr. and Mrs. R. W. Berthel of St. Paul; about 350 pictures of steamboats on the Mississippi River were presented by Mr. Fred Harris of Minneapolis; a like number of pictures showing the activities of the Minnesota Boat Club came from Mr. N. P. Langford of St. Paul; the publishers of the *Minneapolis Star-Journal and Tribune* transferred some five thousand negatives to the society; and radio station WTCN gave the society five recordings of addresses by former Governor Stassen. An oil painting depicting a Finnish homestead in Minnesota, by the Finnish artist Juho Rissanen, was presented by the Finnish-American Historical Society in a formal ceremony on October 16. During the year, the museum collections were increased by 928 articles, 2,444 pictures, about 5,600 negatives, 5 radio transcriptions, 26 cuts, and 115 posters—all gifts.

Accessions to the manuscript collections during the year numbered 115. Among the more important of these were the Clark W.

Thompson Papers, containing a wealth of material on the Indians of Minnesota from 1852 to 1866, an extensive addition to the William Windom collection, additional Knute Nelson material, the large and valuable autograph collection of Mr. William Amerland, a photostatic copy of a deed of transfer for a part of Jonathan Carver's grant, film copies of the Joseph Delafield and international boundary papers in Washington, and an extensive file of archives relating to Fort Snelling.

The society, and through it the people of Minnesota, are fortunate in obtaining so much valuable material at so little cost. The gifts to the society are concrete evidence that the value of its services is recognized by the people of the state. The collection and preservation of historical materials, however, while of utility in itself, would be a comparatively sterile activity were the various types of records not made usable.

The proper custody of each type of historical record preserved by the society — books, pamphlets, documents, newspapers, printed and manuscript maps, posters, pictures, cuts, radio recordings, microfilms, manuscripts, state records, museum articles — requires that special techniques in accessioning, classifying, cataloguing, and shelving be developed and employed. The technical work of caring for its collections, so that they may be readily used, is fundamental in making the society function as a disseminator of knowledge about Minnesota's history. While this important work receives little recognition from the public, it has kept the staff much occupied in recent years.

In the library, 141 more books and pamphlets were accessioned in 1944 than in 1943. The library's accessions department also investigated more titles, placed more orders, and wrote more letters this year than last. The cataloguers made progress in handling uncatalogued material of the preceding year, inasmuch as they catalogued 259 more volumes in 1944 than were accessioned. There were 262 more titles classified and reclassified and 246 more volumes catalogued. In all, 1,948 titles were catalogued. Some 15,295 cards for the various catalogue files were typed. All the books for which Library of Congress cards were obtainable were catalogued; there

remain, however, a great many books awaiting full classification and cataloguing for which no Library of Congress cards have been made.

The library personnel prepared 744 volumes for binding, 293 more than in 1943; and the newspaper division made ready 435 volumes for the binder. In the museum, most of the material received was accessioned, classified, filed, and made usable through the typing of 2,445 catalogue cards. Cards for 810 pictures were added to the analytical picture index; 124 exhibits were arranged; and reserve material was checked, repacked, and rearranged during the year as opportunity permitted. The manuscript division, although handicapped by the continual demand for information from the census records and by changes in its staff, still managed to prepare 1,382 cards for its catalogue.

Once the processing of books, newspapers, manuscripts, pictures, and museum objects is completed, they become available for the pleasure and instruction of the public. The continued effect of the war in causing a decrease in the number of visitors to the Historical Building is still felt; yet more people made use of the society's facilities in 1944 than in 1943. The number of museum visitors was approximately 26,000; over 2,500 were school children and their teachers. The proportion of servicemen among the visitors was greater than heretofore. The manuscript division continued to experience a heavy demand for information from the census returns, the number of requests this year amounting to 2,509. Regular users of manuscript material numbered 422; many mature scholars of national repute were included. Two thousand and forty-four readers used 15,934 books in the reference library. Local history material was in greatest demand, with books on general history and biography, Minnesota history, and genealogy following in popularity. The proportion of genealogists has been increasing: twenty-three per cent of the total number of readers in 1941 were genealogists, thirty-one per cent in 1942, thirty-four per cent in 1943, and thirty-eight in 1944. The newspaper division served 1,374 readers.

The society would indeed be remiss if it conceived of itself merely as a storehouse for historical information. Its highest function is

performed when it acts as the agency for the transmission of this information to the people. Through publications, talks and addresses, correspondence, telephone, radio, exhibits, meetings, tours, and the encouragement of local historical societies, the society strives to acquaint the citizens of the state with their history.

The society's publications are among its most effective means of popularizing history. The news stories which appear in the *Minnesota Historical News* are widely used by the Minnesota newspapers which receive this monthly clip sheet. The four issues of the society's magazine, *Minnesota History*, comprising volume 25 of the series, will, when bound with an index, make up a volume of almost 450 pages. The issues for 1944 contain sixteen articles, thirty book reviews, and numerous news items about the society, local historical societies and events, and general historical publications and activities. Thirty-two authors contributed to the volume, of whom three, Miss Nute, Miss Heilbron, and the acting superintendent, are members of the society's staff. Most voluminous were the contributions made by Miss Heilbron, who, in addition to having immediate editorial responsibility for the magazine, wrote an account of the 1944 annual meeting, a book review, and most of the 136 pages of notes.

Appreciative comments about the society's quarterly continue to be received. The librarian of the National Archives, Mr. Karl L. Trever, reports that "*Minnesota History* is one of the most frequently circulated historical journals in our library and it is highly regarded by all who examine its pages." A soldier in the United States Army writes that he "wouldn't want to be without the magazine," for "it's a welcome tie with home."

Good progress has been made on the index to volume 25 of *Minnesota History*, and this essential guide to the contents of the magazine should be ready early in 1945. Another project of importance that may reach completion in 1945 is the consolidated index for volumes 11 to 20. The index is almost ready for printing and a request for an appropriation for this publication has been placed before the legislature.

The society should strive with every means at its command to

continue the publication of its *Narrative and Documents* series, its *Special Bulletins*, and occasional special publications, whether they be collections of source materials or popular accounts of some aspect of Minnesota history. To do less is to fail in the ultimate purpose of fostering knowledge about Minnesota's history. An item for funds for publication has been included in the budget request submitted to the 1945 legislature. A special plea has been made by the organized Minnesota librarians, as well as by others, that funds be provided to resume the publication of the *Check List of Minnesota Public Documents*.

During 1944 the last 776 copies of the society's most popular publication, Miss Nute's *The Voyageur's Highway*, were sold. A third printing of three thousand copies was placed on sale in December. By the end of the month over a third of this edition had been sold. Through the generosity of a donor who wishes to remain anonymous, three hundred copies of the book have been made available for presentation to members of the legislature and other state officials. The sale of this book will enable the society to build up a fund for the publication of other books.

The hundredth anniversary of the organization of the territory of Minnesota, the founding of its first newspaper, and the establishment of this society—all of which took place in 1849—should be marked by appropriate observances. Special volumes commemorating these events will endure long after the anniversary occasion is past. A collection of editorials by James M. Goodhue, the editor of Minnesota's first newspaper, already has been prepared for publication by Mrs. Berthel. A volume to mark the centennial of the establishment of the territory and one on the history of the Minnesota Historical Society should get under way. Before these centennial volumes appear in print, we all hope the war will be over. Studies on Minnesota's part in the war should be included in the society's publication program.

The work of caring for the society's collections—the function of custodianship—occupies a disproportionately large amount of time on the part of the professional staff. Its members have too little

time for research and scholarship. Others should be relieved of their duties, as Miss Nute was last year, so that they may collect materials on and write about Minnesota history. Until the staff is enlarged and the burden of work placed upon the present members is alleviated, their productivity will suffer. The legislature is being requested to appropriate sufficient money for a moderate increase in the number of people employed. For twenty years the society has been unable to add to its staff in a ratio commensurate with the tremendous increase of work it has experienced. In 1943 the regular staff consisted of twenty-four; in 1923 it consisted of twenty-one. The society is fortunate in having loyal employees. They are both underpaid and overworked.

Miss Nute continued her research and writing on northern Minnesota. She gave twenty-four addresses, including one radio broadcast. She wrote four articles for publication, numerous book reviews, and a brief history of Minnesota which will be published under the sponsorship of the tourist bureau in the department of conservation. Her book, *Lake Superior*, which appeared in July, elicited favorable comment from reviewers. She is now at work on a study of iron mining in Minnesota and is actively supervising the preparation of a second volume for the Clarence W. Alvord Memorial Commission, of which she is chairman.

In addition to her editorial work and writing in connection with *Minnesota History*, Miss Heilbron wrote, for the American Association for State and Local History, a pamphlet on *How to Organize a Local Historical Society*, which appeared as number 9 of its *Bulletins*. Her article on "Walter Reed in Minnesota," published in the September, 1943, issue of *Minnesota History*, was reprinted in the *Journal-Lancet* for March, 1944. She visited local historical society museums at Winona, St. Peter, Willmar, and Lake City, and the private museum of Mr. Earle Brown at Brooklyn Center. Reports on three of these museums were published in *Minnesota History* in 1944, and others will appear in due course. Miss Heilbron gave much time to a committee on arrangements which planned a Folk Arts Conference held at the University of Minnesota in September. She

and Miss Nute appeared on the program, which included speakers from many parts of the United States and from Canada. The conference resulted in the formal organization of the Minnesota Folk Arts Foundation, which elected the acting superintendent to its board of directors.

Five members of the staff, Miss Krausnick, Miss Nute, Miss Heilbron, Mr. Babcock, and the acting superintendent, attended the annual meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association in St. Louis, where they heard the association's president, Dean Theodore C. Blegen of the University of Minnesota graduate school, a former superintendent of the society, give his presidential address on "Our Widening Province." Mr. Blegen, who had been on leave from the university to direct the historical service board of the American Historical Association, returned to the campus in September. The superintendent of the society, Major Arthur J. Larsen, continued to serve in Washington, D. C., as assistant historical officer in the Air Transport Command. He is present at this annual meeting of the society as its principal speaker.

The superintendent of the society, together with the commissioners of conservation and highways, comprise the State Geographic Board. Under the WPA, the board sponsored a project in which the society was interested—that of collecting information about Minnesota geographic names. Since the society received many requests for information about place names, the superintendent was made secretary of the board and Mrs. Berthel was given supervision over the project. Under her direction, the WPA workers compiled some 200,000 slips, each containing data on geographic names in Minnesota. Upon the termination of the WPA, this large mass of unorganized material was turned over to the board. As her time has permitted, Mrs. Berthel since has checked, consolidated, and put into usable shape the information collected. In 1944 the board decided to push the work of organizing these records. The commissioners of conservation and highways furnished two typists from June 1 to September 1 and another from June 1 to September 15. Under Mrs. Berthel's supervision they typed, cross-referenced, and

filed approximately 13,500 cards for two alphabetical files, one for counties and one for the state as a whole. The consolidation of the WPA material for eighty of Minnesota's eighty-seven counties was completed. While much further research on the geographic names of these counties remains to be done, the work accomplished by Mrs. Berthel makes the information already collected ready for use and marks a great step forward in our knowledge about the origin, history, and evolution of Minnesota place names. When the work is completed, and a state gazetteer is published, as the law establishing the State Geographic Board contemplates, Upham's extensive work on *Minnesota Geographic Names*, published by the society in 1920, will be superseded.

Special activities by other members of the staff include five addresses by Mr. Babcock and five by the acting superintendent. Mr. Babcock wrote the news stories which appeared in the twelve issues of the *Minnesota Historical News* and acted as adviser to several county historical societies who sought the aid of the Minnesota Historical Society. Mr. Hodnefield continued to supervise the collection of those records relating to the war which are not normally part of the collecting activities of the society. A large part of his time was consumed in devising makeshift arrangements for the shelving of newspapers, the available shelving having been fully utilized.

This problem of space, incidentally, which was discussed in the report for last year, has become still more acute in the newspaper division, the library, the museum, and the manuscript division. The library has no more space for documents, the shelving set aside for Minnesota high school and college annuals is congested, and the remaining stacks are badly crowded. In the manuscript division, no space is left for new accessions; and in the museum all available storage space is occupied.

Miss Jerabek began work on a check list of Minnesota state documents for the years from 1858 to 1923; helped Dr. Joseph Rouvek in his preparation of the recently published volume on *American Slavs: A Bibliography*; served on two committees of the Minnesota Library Association; and until July was president of the University of Min-

nesota Division of Library Instruction Alumni Association. Miss Fawcett and Mrs. Warming handled an unusual number of requests for information by telephone—950 inquiries as compared with 550 last year. Three hundred and six answers to inquiries by mail were sent out. Miss Fawcett continued to write the notes on genealogical accessions for *Minnesota History*.

Miss Nordin and the rest of the staff of the catalogue division undertook several special tasks last year. Ninety-five volumes in the Bible collection were examined and cards recording the titles, the sources of the books, and the family records, when present, were prepared. Work begun several years ago on an official Minnesota author entry file of 1,500 cards was completed and a duplicate file sent to the University of Minnesota library for comparison with its file. Henceforth, this file is to be maintained by the co-operative effort of the society and the university libraries. Catalogue procedure as practiced in the society's library was explained in some detail to Miss Jean Black of the Iowa State Historical Society. The society's methods of operation also were studied in considerable detail by Mr. Lewis H. Thomas of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

Seven staff members resigned in 1944, including Miss Alma Jensen, Miss Rhoda Christiansen, Miss Helen Gladoski, and Miss Adeline Levenson. Five new additions in personnel were made.

The ninety-fifth annual meeting of the society, held on January 10, 1944, included three sessions—a luncheon, a business meeting in the afternoon, and an evening session. As in 1943, the local history conference formerly held in the morning was omitted because of wartime transportation difficulties. The annual address was given by Professor Laurence Schmeckebier, who spoke on "Art on Main Street." A result of Professor Schmeckebier's talk was the appointment of a committee, composed of members of this society, on buildings having historical and architectural interest. On October 16 the Minnesota Historical Society and the Finnish-American Historical Society held a joint meeting, which attracted an unusually large audience.

The society suffered a serious loss early in 1944 in the death of its

president, Lester B. Shippee. Both as a member and as an officer Dr. Shippee had been actively interested in the affairs of the society, which benefited greatly from his wise and sound counsel in matters of policy and scholarly activities. Judge Haycraft was elected president in his place. Another loss was sustained by the recent death of Edgar L. Mattson, a member of the council for the past two years.

At the close of 1944, the society had 1,641 members — an increase of 32 over the membership for the previous year. While there was a decrease of 4 active members and 4 institutional members, subscribing members increased by 40. The increase in the number of subscribing members resulted from the inauguration of a school service program, which attracted a large number of schools. Under the direction of Miss Jensen, the society's school service functioned effectively and won the enthusiastic approval of educators. Unfortunately, it was necessary to discontinue the program because of lack of funds. The publication in *Minnesota History* of four informing articles about "Minnesota History and the Schools" is a by-product of this program.

Since the First World War, more than sixty local historical societies have been organized in Minnesota, forty-seven of which were active in 1944. Of this number, forty-one are county historical societies which receive some form of assistance — room, heat, light, janitorial service — from county or city governments or library boards. Sixteen county societies in 1944 received appropriations ranging from a hundred to three thousand dollars from county boards of commissioners. The county societies, to be eligible for local governmental aid, must be affiliated with and approved by the Minnesota Historical Society. This relationship has caused them to look to the society for advice and assistance. The society should equip itself to meet their demands by adding to its staff someone who could visit local societies and advise and assist them regularly.

With the income from the society's endowment decreasing, we need to consider whether the membership dues should not be increased. It is my conviction that members can be obtained as easily with the dues set at five dollars a year as at three dollars.

The society is an old, established institution which has come to occupy a position in the life of the state which it cannot disregard, even if it wishes. It is expected to collect and to preserve books, manuscripts, newspapers, museum objects, and other material on the history of the state, and to make the facts of Minnesota history known to the people. It has developed a capable staff, highly trained in this work. If it is to continue to function according to its customary standards, it must have an appropriation sufficient to meet the higher costs of books, binding, printing, and office supplies, as well as to give its staff moderate salary increases.

Local history activity in Minnesota rests on a firm and broad basis. The network of local societies fostered by the Minnesota Historical Society shows vigor and activity. Soundly conceived programs of historical activity are under way in many counties. The approaching territorial centennial and the centennial of the organization of the society will stimulate an already lively interest in Minnesota history and give an opportunity for increased service on the part of the society. The organization must be prepared to meet the challenge of the new demands that will be made upon it.



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