

The 1945 Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society

THE HISTORY of transportation, particularly in Minnesota and the Northwest, was the central theme of the programs planned for both the noon and the evening sessions of the Minnesota Historical Society's ninety-sixth annual meeting, which was held in St. Paul on January 15, 1945. For the opening session more than two hundred people gathered at the St. Paul Hotel at 12:00 M. In the absence of the society's president, Judge Julius E. Haycraft of Fairmont, the vice-president, Judge Kenneth G. Brill of St. Paul, presided at the luncheon session, appropriately opening his remarks with a tribute to Judge Haycraft and an appreciation of his services as president.

Preliminary to the scheduled program, an important new work in two volumes on *The Swedes and the Swedish Settlements in North America* by Helge Nelson was presented to the society.¹ The books, which were published in Sweden and are the gift of the Swedish Royal Ministry for Foreign Affairs, were sent to the meeting by the consul general of Sweden at Minneapolis, Mr. Carl F. Hellström. He was represented by the chancellor at the consulate, Mr. Ivan Rodberg, who made the presentation. In a letter to Judge Haycraft, which Mr. Rodberg read, Mr. Hellström remarked that the "work is the first broad scholarly presentation of a subject equally important to Sweden and to the United States." On behalf of the society, the books were accepted by Dean Theodore C. Blegen of the graduate school in the University of Minnesota, who recalled Dr. Nelson's visit to Minnesota in search of material and described his work as a significant example of "international scholarly co-operation."

The program proper opened with the presentation to the state and the society of a portrait in oil of Charles M. Babcock, whose name will be forever identified with the origin and growth of the Minnesota trunk highway system. The picture was presented by

¹ For a review of this work, see *post*, p. 56-59.

Mr. Earle Brown of Brooklyn Center on behalf of the Charles M. Babcock Memorial Association, of which he is chairman. In the field of modern highway development, said Mr. Brown, Babcock "was truly a pioneer, leading a movement which in a few years brought a far greater advance in road building than in the entire previous history of the state." The speaker outlined Babcock's career, pointing out that his interest in road betterment stemmed from his experience as a merchant at Elk River; that it led to his appointment as a member of the state highway commission in 1910 and as commissioner of highways when the office was established in 1917; that he planned the state's trunk highway system; and that he saw three-fourths of the road system he had planned completed before he left office in 1932. In order to honor the memory of Babcock, who died in 1936, the association of his friends and admirers decided to erect a marker on the site of his former home in Elk River and to commission the painting of a portrait for the historical society's permanent collection. The picture, which is the work of Carl Rawson of Minneapolis, was displayed at the luncheon meeting. It was accepted on behalf of the state and the society by Governor Edward Thye of Minnesota, who commended Babcock for distributing highways and their advantages equally among all the people of the state and for giving Minnesota a system of highways in place of a system of trails.

This tribute to Minnesota's first commissioner of highways served as an appropriate introduction for the next address, which dealt with the "History and Organization of the Minnesota Department of Highways." After being introduced by Judge Brill, the speaker, Mr. M. J. Hoffman, the present state commissioner of highways, called upon a member of the audience, Mr. John H. Mullen, to rise, for the latter worked under Babcock and was his assistant in the highway department.

Mr. Hoffman traced the story of Minnesota's road-building activities back to the early years of statehood, when "wagon roads were needed mostly as a means of getting to the nearest railroad station." In the 1890's, he said, "diversified farming and co-operative creameries created a demand for good roads so farmers could market perishable products at frequent intervals." The introduction of the

bicycle and the small-town merchants' demand for roads leading to their communities were other factors that aroused interest in road building. Eventually, in 1905, a law creating the Minnesota highway commission and providing for an annual tax levy for roads and bridges was passed, Mr. Hoffman reported. In order to make the work of the commission effective, however, it was necessary on several occasions to amend the state constitution, which "prohibited any state participation in works of internal improvement."

The speaker focused his attention largely on the work of his department after 1917, when the highway commission was abolished and the office of commissioner of highways was created. It was this position that Babcock held from its inception to 1932. He began at once to formulate a plan for a state trunk highway system—a problem that he had long been studying, said Mr. Hoffman. After an energetic campaign, in which the slogan "Pull Minnesota out of the mud" figured prominently, a constitutional amendment embodying Babcock's plan was adopted in 1920. The plan was unique and well in advance of general practice elsewhere, according to the speaker, "not only because a system of 70 routes aggregating about 7,000 miles was written into the constitution," but because "it transferred to the state the entire responsibility for the location, acquisition of right-of-way, construction, and maintenance of this system of highways." Furthermore it provided for the "first constitutional dedication of motor-vehicle taxes to highway purposes." The speaker noted that "four years later Minnesota made a similar dedication of the revenue from the gasoline tax," and that fifteen other states have since followed Minnesota's example by adopting amendments "dedicating road-user taxes to road purposes." Today, he revealed, Minnesota "has a total of over 120,000 miles of roads, ranking fifth among the states in total road mileage."

Mr. Hoffman made it clear that "although the good roads movement in Minnesota had been started without the aid of the automobile, it acquired no great momentum until the motor vehicle began to come into general use." He thus paved the way for the final speaker on the luncheon program, Miss Dorothy V. Walters of Kenosha, Wisconsin, who took as her subject "Pioneering with the

Automobile in Minnesota." As a graduate student in history and a teacher of social studies, Miss Walters has made a special study of the beginnings of the automobile era, particularly before 1908, and the inauguration of the good roads movement. Her entertaining narrative about the problems faced by pioneer Minnesota motorists is published in this issue of *Minnesota History*.

For the business session of the annual meeting about fifty people gathered in the auditorium of the Historical Building at 3:15 P. M. This meeting was devoted largely to the presentation of the reports of the society's treasurer, Mr. Julian Baird, and of its acting superintendent, Dr. Lewis Beeson. The latter's survey of the work and accomplishments of the society in 1944 appears in full in the present number of this magazine. Mr. Charles Stees read the report of the auditing committee, and Mr. Homer Clark presented the report of the nominating committee. The following thirty life members of the society, listed in Mr. Clark's report, were then elected to serve on the executive council for the three years from 1945 to 1948: Dr. John M. Armstrong of St. Paul, Julian B. Baird of St. Paul, Henry N. Benson of St. Peter, Theodore C. Blegen of St. Paul, Elmer F. Blu of Duluth, Kenneth G. Brill of St. Paul, Ralph Budd of Chicago, Homer P. Clark of St. Paul, the Reverend James Connolly of St. Paul, George C. Crosby of Minneapolis, William W. Cutler of St. Paul, Mrs. Grace Flandrau of St. Paul, Guy Stanton Ford of Washington, Laura Furness of St. Paul, Julius E. Haycraft of Fairmont, Louis W. Hill, Jr., of St. Paul, Jefferson Jones of Hopkins, August C. Krey of St. Paul, Arthur J. Larsen of St. Paul, Victor E. Lawson of Willmar, Albert J. Lobb of Rochester, James E. Montague of Crookston, Andrew J. Newgren of St. Paul, Ira C. Oehler of St. Paul, Bergmann Richards of Minneapolis, L. A. Rossman of Grand Rapids, Charles Stees of St. Paul, Sigurd Ueland of Minneapolis, Thomas F. Wallace of Minneapolis, and Dr. Harry B. Zimmermann of St. Paul. At the conclusion of the session, the newly elected council members met in the superintendent's office to select officers for the triennium. They are Judge Brill, president, Dean Blegen and Mr. Richards, vice-presidents, Mr. Baird, treasurer, and Dr. Larsen, secretary. Dr. Beeson, who has been acting secretary since

the fall of 1942, when the secretary and superintendent was granted a leave of absence to serve with the armed forces, was re-elected to that office.

The new president presided at the evening session, which convened in the auditorium of the Historical Building at 8:00 P. M. The entire session was given over to the annual address by the society's secretary and superintendent on leave, Major Larsen. His survey of the origin and development of the Air Transport Command of the Army Air Forces brought the day's program of transportation history to a climax with a contemporary chapter. As assistant historical officer of the command, Major Larsen has an opportunity to record its history as it is made, drawing upon the annals of our own day for the benefit of present and future airmen as well as historians. The publication of his illuminating address as the leading article in this number of *Minnesota History* makes it available to all members of the society and readers of its quarterly.

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