

The Minnesota Historical Society in 1945¹

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WHEN WE, the official historians of Minnesota, study the history of the Minnesota Historical Society during the ninety-six years of its life, we find that its growth has paralleled closely the growth of the state as a whole. We observe that the society, as measured by the volume of its collections, the extent of their use, and the care they receive, moved steadily forward from the time when a sincerely interested group of territorial pioneers devoted their amateurish efforts to the task of preserving the record of their achievements, to the present, when we have a fine building with good equipment and a professional staff. We follow the progress of the society as traced by its membership growth, and we see the transition through slow and painful stages of expansion to a state-wide organization whose influence is felt in almost every community in the commonwealth.

If we seek to measure the standing of the society in the world of historical societies, we observe that it has always ranked high. The infant territory of Minnesota led its more mature neighbors in the creation of a historical society by several years. Together with the historical societies in neighboring states, this institution has established standards of excellence which have not been surpassed, so that today it is acknowledged to be one of the best in the whole nation.

But something else becomes evident to us. We see that the history of the society has been marked at irregular intervals by recurrences of new life and vigor amounting in each case almost to a renaissance. The initial burst of energy and ambition fired by the chartering of the organization in 1849 gradually subsided until the society became dor-

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mant. Then, during and following the Civil War, came the first rebirth of the society. The librarianship of J. Fletcher Williams, starting in 1867, marked the real beginning of this institution's outstanding library collections and gave the Minnesota Historical Society permanence and a place in the state. Williams symbolizes for us the able and intelligent councilors who put him in office and gave stimulus to a program for building the society.

For forty years after Williams came to the society the governing body was content to follow along the lines of development its energetic predecessors had laid out. But in the early years of the present century, new stirrings of life in the society's membership became evident. The need for more room for the storage of the now extensive collections gave rise to the "Committee of 100," and legislation was obtained in 1913 and 1915 which resulted in the building of the society's present home. The ferment extended into the very life of the society and brought about a revitalization of its staff. Dr. Solon J. Buck was brought in to give professional direction to the society, and he drew into its orbit his able successor, Dr. Theodore C. Blegen, and the group of professional historians which is today the core of its staff. It was they who created the society's magazine, *Minnesota History*, which, under the editorship of Dean Blegen, was acknowledged by professional historians as among the best of the historical society quarterlies, if not the best. The organization of historical societies in the localities of the state was begun in this period, and the publication of Dr. Folwell's *History of Minnesota* did much to win for this society its present reputation as a publisher of scholarly works. Interest in the society by the people was manifested by the increase in membership from less than 450 in 1914 to something over 1,700 in the middle 1920's. But behind the success of the society as manifested in these achievements were the men on the executive council who quietly gave impetus to its progress — men like Charles P. Noyes, Gideon S. Ives, Frederic Fogg, Everett H. Bailey, William H. Lightner, and Guy Stanton Ford. It was they who laid the foundation upon which this modern society is built.

As we meet this year, the society has just passed through another war period. Outwardly, it is little different from the society of prewar

days. But something has been happening to it during the years of war upheaval. There is abroad again that feeling of restiveness which characterized the society of seventy and of thirty years ago. Perhaps it is too early to define this restiveness as a rebirth, but, to one who has returned after an absence of three years, it bears resemblances to the periods of renaissance which I have described above.

What has been happening in the society during these war years? First of all, the routine, professional operations of its staff have continued with little perceptible alteration in scope, or, for that matter, degree, although there have been numerous changes in personnel. In one division alone there were, during these years, eighteen persons performing at various times the duty assignments in three positions. Personnel changes in other divisions were less numerous, but they were serious obstacles in the way of satisfactory performance of routine duties which had to be carried on from day to day. The resignations of Miss Gertrude Krausnick as librarian on December 1, after more than twenty years of service, and, on December 31, of Dr. Lewis Beeson, who so ably carried out the duties of superintendent during the last three years, have left serious gaps in the ranks of our staff.

In spite of these difficulties of personnel, the amount of work accomplished in the way of acquiring, cataloguing, and caring for new materials in the society's collections compares favorably with that performed in other years. The number of books, pamphlets, and periodicals added to the main library collections in 1945, for example, was 2,056, nearly 53 per cent of which came as gifts. To make new materials usable by the general public, 10,838 cards for 1,991 volumes were added to the public catalogue.

Additions to the manuscript collections during the past year totaled 129, varying in size from single items to extensive sets of papers containing many thousands of individual papers. They included such items as the papers of a St. Paul lawyer in the territorial period; papers of a former president of this society, Edward C. Gale; those of a University of Minnesota botanist, Professor Fred Butters; the diaries of Thomas Wales, telling his story of pioneer days near Lake Pepin; and the rich and important collection of papers of David Shepard,

a St. Paul railroad construction contractor who played an important part in the building of the railroad systems of Minnesota and the Northwest. For the most part, these and other important collections of personal papers have been catalogued and made available for public use.

In the newspaper department the current issues of 666 newspapers were received, most of which were published in Minnesota. During the year 536 volumes of newspapers were bound and added to the society's collection of 22,770 bound volumes, bringing the total of bound newspapers preserved by the society to 23,306 volumes.

In the museum 346 articles were received. So varied were they in character that they covered the whole gamut of human experience in Minnesota. There was a heavy, old-fashioned breaking plow used in breaking the prairie sod of western Minnesota. There were additions to the military collections from both the last war and the war of 1917-18. There were numerous additions of costumes and household goods and wares.

It was to be expected that the number of persons using the facilities of the society would decline during these war years. During 1945 the museum recorded 38,470 visitors, a substantial increase over the preceding two years, reflecting the return of peace. More than 6,000 of these were included in 205 class groups which toured the museum. A series of special exhibits, accompanied by evening showings that attracted new people to the museum, was inaugurated during the fall months. An uncounted number of visitors at the Fort Snelling Round Tower Museum gained an acquaintance with the society through the exhibits there, which were arranged under the supervision of Dr. Nute. Library use followed the same general trends as those demonstrated in the early years of the war. In the reference room 2,170 people used 13,852 books and pamphlets, substantially the same number as in the previous years. Readers in the manuscript division totaled 407, again only slightly fewer than the number served in 1944. The requests for census information in this division, however, showed a substantial reduction, as the number of completed census certificates declined from a little more than 2,500 in 1944 to 1,484 in 1945. There was a slight increase in the use of the newspaper collec-

tions: 1,534 readers used 4,278 bound newspaper volumes and 35,951 current issues. The statistics of public use on the whole show that the society functioned much more nearly along normal lines than might have been expected in the years when severe restrictions hampered travel and when extra work in volunteer war activities cut into leisure time.

During 1945 volume 26 of *Minnesota History*, the society's quarterly magazine, was published. When bound, it will form a volume of 399 pages and the index. It contains nearly the same number of pages as earlier volumes in the set, but, because government regulations compelled the use of a lighter paper stock than hitherto has been used, it will appear rather smaller. Twenty-six articles and twenty-two book reviews, together with a "Roll of Members," make up the bulk of the volume. There were thirty-two contributors to the volume, including five staff members and a galaxy of professionally known scholars and authors. The subjects treated cover the whole chronological range of human experience from prehistoric man to phases of American participation in the war so recently ended. An index to the volume is now in preparation.

The society's contribution in the field of special publications has not been spectacular. Yet, I would like to point out that we are now distributing the fourth printing of the most popular book the society has published—*The Voyageur's Highway*. During the last quarter of the year alone, more than 2,700 copies were sold. The society also inaugurated during 1945 a modest series of publications called *Pictorial Minnesota*. The new series consists of sets of pictures for school and group use. Two sets, dealing with "The Indians" and with "Pioneer Buildings and Equipment," have been issued in editions of five hundred copies each. The publication has had such success that the early publication of two additional sets is contemplated. Funds from the sale of the earlier sets have accumulated to make further publication possible.

These activities point to a sound, vital organization. In themselves, they show that the society emerged from the war period without the curtailment of the scope or extent of its work one might have expected or feared. But it is to other activities of the society that we look

for indications of the new stirring of which I spoke earlier. It is manifested in the activities of the executive council and of the membership of the society. The success of the society during the last legislative session in gaining increased appropriations for carrying out its work was due in large part to the efforts of a legislative committee of the council headed by a former president of the society, Mr. Ira C. Oehler. The same group obtained funds for a badly needed field director for the society, a position ably filled by Mr. Richard Sackett; through its efforts staff members formerly paid from the private funds of the society were placed on the public payroll; and after the legislative session was over, it was Mr. Oehler and Mr. Ralph J. Mather of St. Paul who obtained from the legislative advisory committee a one-year grant of three thousand dollars to pay for salaries and supplies for two museum guards.

In itself, this is an indication of the great interest and activity of the executive council, but it by no means completes the story of the council's work. Important committees of the council have been formed from the society's general membership to further activities in which the society has a vital interest.

Under the chairmanship of Professor Horace Morse, a committee has been devising means to foster the interest of children in the schools in the study of state and local history. During September letters were sent to school superintendents throughout the state suggesting the formation in the schools of Junior Historian chapters affiliated with the Minnesota Historical Society. Prizes were to be awarded to chapters which submitted the best plans of organization and the most complete programs of activities for the year. Individual prizes for the best essays in an essay contest were also provided. Through the efforts of Professor A. C. Krey, a University of Minnesota scholarship was made available to the winner of the first prize in this contest. The Junior Historical Society, still in the process of organization, is demonstrating very satisfactory vigor.

Professor Laurence E. Schmeckebier of the fine arts department in the University of Minnesota serves as chairman of another important committee—that on historic buildings. Under a slogan of

"Art on Main Street," this committee has undertaken to arouse interest among Minnesotans in the historical architecture in the state and to bring about the preservation of historic buildings.

This society has had a limited membership which has remained almost stationary during the past several years. In an effort to reach beyond this plateau, the society's president, Judge Kenneth Brill, appointed a member of the society, Mr. Mather, chairman of its membership and publicity committees. He began an extremely active membership drive during the closing months of 1945, which resulted in the enrollment of 156 new members for the year, bringing the society's membership to 1,700.

The need for carrying out a vigorous program of publication has been felt for many years. Under the leadership of Judge Brill, Dean Blegen, and Dr. Krey, an approach has been made to this major problem. The public-spirited generosity of a Chicago member of the society has made it possible to carry on an intensive promotion campaign for the sale of *The Voyageur's Highway*, and has encouraged planning for similar popular, yet scholarly, books. A generous gift of twenty-five thousand dollars from the Mayo Properties Foundation of Rochester permits the society to publish a history of public health in Minnesota, a project which is to be undertaken with the co-operation of the department of history and the dean of the graduate school in the University of Minnesota. A gift of a thousand dollars has been received from Mr. Robert Butler of St. Paul for another publication. These gifts have stimulated enthusiasm and have encouraged the planning for other publications.

Three years hence, Minnesota will commemorate the hundredth anniversary of its establishment. Already much work has been done to lay the groundwork for the society's participation in the event. Governor Thyne has indicated that he wishes the society to plan a program of commemoration of the centennial for him. Public announcement of this designation of the society awaits an auspicious public occasion. During the past several months members of the staff have explored the recent precedents for state celebrations of their anniversaries. They have analyzed, catalogued, and evaluated the

experiences of other states which have commemorated centennials, sesquicentennials, and tercentenaries. Thus, a groundwork has been laid for the important task of preparing a centennial plan.

The picture of the society in 1945 indicates that it is more active than it has been in a generation. There is a portent of impending activity, a feeling that we are standing on the verge of new and important developments. No one can tell what they may be, but we can take some steps to be ready for them.

In the first place, our library is at a critical point in its development. Our bookstacks are jammed with treasured publications. We need to define our aims, formulate policies, and chart a course for the library for the future. A comparable situation exists in the museum. Our community attic is bulging with relics of our past. We need to redesign our space, perhaps alter our room design. We need interested, intelligent advice to help plan the museum of the future, solve problems of space, arrangement, and policy.

We should be casting our eyes to the far horizon, laying plans for a period three, or five, or fifteen years away. A committee of the council should be formed to work with the executive committee in laying the groundwork for this long-range planning. The work of such a group should consider all facets of the society's many-sided activities. It should probe into the society's policies, its rules, and its very charter, if need be, to see if they are adaptable to the age which is ahead.



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