

The Territorial Centennial of 1949¹

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THE TASK that has been laid upon me for this occasion is a most pleasant one, for it involves speaking to those whom I greatly respect about a subject dear to my heart; but it is also a difficult task, for it requires me to try to cover in a few minutes not only the factual outlines of a specific program almost any detail of which would take hours to describe properly, but also something of the philosophy which underlies (or in my judgment ought to underlie) the Minnesota Territorial Centennial and its observance by the people of the state. All this puts me into somewhat the position of the youthful Macaulay, who, you remember, tried to write at the age of twelve "a Compendium of Universal History." Let me begin, then, by saying that in being proud of the fact that circumstance has made me the agent of the Minnesota Historical Society to direct the 1949 Centennial, I am also very humble and deeply aware of my own deficiencies in attempting anything so tremendously important. And let me add now a statement of appreciation for the interest and devoted support, deserving much more emphasis and recognition than I can give them here, of the society's members, officers, and staff.

What I shall try to do today is, first, to rehearse the course of events leading to the Centennial plan itself; second, to explain comprehensively what is being done to realize that plan; and, finally, to say a few words about the general objectives of the celebration.

Early in 1946 Governor Edward J. Thye initiated consideration of the Territorial Centennial by writing a letter to Judge Kenneth G. Brill, president of the Minnesota Historical Society, in which he called upon the society to prepare the "official program of commemoration" for the Centennial.² Proceeding under the authority

¹ This survey of Centennial plans and progress was read before the luncheon session of the Minnesota Historical Society's ninety-ninth annual meeting, held in St. Paul on January 12, 1948. *Ed.*

² For the complete text of Governor Thye's letter, see *ante*, 27:45.

of this letter, the Minnesota Historical Society prepared a plan and submitted it seasonably to the governor and the legislature. From the syllabus of the plan as submitted, I should like to quote two paragraphs which summarize admirably the ideas which should dominate us in observing a one-hundredth anniversary of our state:

“When individuals reach a notable milestone in their lives, they consciously or unconsciously take inventory of the year behind them. They consider the factors that have made them the persons they are, that have set the pattern for the lives they are leading, and they weigh their failures against their successes. The plan for this Centennial commemorative program gives an opportunity to Minnesotans collectively to look back and take stock, to consider this state that they have built, to measure what has been accomplished and how, and, most important of all, to determine in what direction they are headed.

“On the whole, Minnesota’s first century of progress will give its people no little satisfaction. But, as individuals compare their shortcomings with their successes, so the people of this state should see the mistakes that have been made as well as the good things that have been done. They will make capital of both their successes and their mistakes for building the great future.” The last paragraph reminds one of Bulwer Lytton’s lines, “By the dark shape of what he is, serene stands the bright ghost of what he might have been.”

The details of the plan itself, I shall not now explore further, because they will become apparent as I try to discuss our efforts to work them out. For the present, I should merely like to point out that in general the plan emphasized the popular or “grass roots” character which any celebration worthy of the name must achieve, and that the plan specified an attempt to insure such a state-wide character by providing for celebration features on a county and community basis as well as on an all-state basis. In other words, the program of celebration in 1949 must reach every individual and every hamlet in Minnesota.

The plan was well received by the state administration and the legislature, and in 1947 a bill was introduced and became law designating the Minnesota Historical Society as the agency to direct the

Minnesota Territorial Centennial and providing money for that purpose. It is significant that this society was named as the directing authority, for in no manner could the essentially serious cultural nature of the event have been better established. To speak in colloquial terms, the legislature by the law itself gave notice that this one-hundredth birthday party was to be neither a tourist exploiters' binge nor a political critics' wake, but rather an essentially sober and thoughtful gathering together of a great family to do honor to a patriarch. It is also significant that the modest size of the appropriation accompanying the authority put additional emphasis upon the popular nature of the celebration. In effect, the appropriation was so modest that it told everyone not to expect the state government to provide sandwiches and circuses. The people themselves must give the party to the state. It said, "Come, and bring your own lunch."

You cannot fail to have noted how completely this procedure carries out the ideas in the letter of Governor Thye and in the original prospectus drawn up by the Minnesota Historical Society. In my judgment the philosophy of the Centennial thus adopted is the correct one. It would no doubt be gratifying to the vanity of the primary participants in a celebration to make a great show and noise in the world by a spectacular parade of Minnesota's many advantages; and certainly during 1949 many worthy enterprises will wish to make commercial hay, so to speak, by using the advertising possibilities of the Centennial year, which is in every way proper. But in the very charter itself of the official Centennial, it is unmistakably set down that this celebration is truly to be of the people, by the people, and for the people, and that all other ideas are incidental.

Subsequent to the passage of the authorizing act, the society set up a Centennial staff, which began its work about August 1, 1947. Under the direction of this staff the details of the celebration plan are being worked out.

I have already drawn your attention to the double aspect of these details, namely, all-state and local. It is fitting that there should be at least a few occasions upon which all the people of the state may have an opportunity to celebrate together. Some of these occasions are provided by special dates during the Centennial year. On March 3,

1949, for example, occurs the one-hundredth anniversary of the organic act creating the territory; on April 2, 1849, Alexander Ramsey was commissioned territorial governor; on June 1, 1849, Ramsey issued the proclamation of territorial government; on June 11 and July 7, 1849, respectively, he established judicial and legislative districts; on August 1, 1849, was held the first election; on September 3, 1849, the first territorial legislature convened. These dates are proper subjects for state-wide commemorative observances, and certain of them will be selected for that purpose.

But it is not merely by the chronology of official events that history is made vivid, and the Centennial we celebrate is not only and not even chiefly a reminder of what happened in 1849, any more than is any birthday of any individual restricted to the recollection of what happened in the year of his birth. We are part of all that has happened to us, and vice versa. The Centennial year 1949 just gives us a peg on which to hang the glowing canvas of Minnesota's colorful and dramatic past. In order to vitalize sections of this broad canvas, pageants will be presented in various parts of the state, probably in the state parks, but possibly elsewhere also. These pageants will illustrate the drama and vicissitude and achievement of earlier days, and will be regional in that they will try in each case to emphasize matters of local historical importance.

To select for emphasis only the physically colorful and dramatic, however, would be to falsify history. Such episodes are necessary for successful pageants, but Minnesota's progress has been served also by those who cleared land and plowed, who sowed and reaped, who put to pasture and milked, who crossbred and fertilized. To the spectacular pageantry of the explorer and the fur trader, the Indian and the missionary and the soldier, the lumberman and the mining prospector, we must add the quiet pageantry of the indomitable farmer. Consequently, a program of a different sort is under way in the realm of agriculture. This program aims at the introduction of themes appropriate to the Centennial into all agricultural gatherings and activities during 1949—the Minnesota State Fair, the county fairs, and meetings of rural groups of all kinds and ages. The agricultural committee of the Centennial is also at work on a history

of agriculture in Minnesota, and on plans for a permanent museum of agriculture which might well have its beginnings as a result of interest kindled during 1949. Obviously the proper commemoration of agricultural history is bound to be largely a rural or "grass roots" affair, and the agricultural committee is organized on a state-wide basis.

Like the Minnesota Historical Society as a whole, the Centennial staff has a full appreciation of the importance in any celebration of this kind of what is done to enlist the interest and participation of the young. Accordingly, the school committee is well advanced upon a program designed not only to enrich the school curriculum in history and the social sciences by the addition of special materials in Minnesota history, but also to cultivate in Minnesota youths a continuing extracurricular zest for and interest in the discovery and preservation of historical objects and writings. The latter is being done by a tie-up with the Junior Historian movement already started by the society, and by special activity programs initiated in the schools but reaching into the home or out-of-school life of the children. The school committee has been working as such chiefly with children below college age, but Minnesota colleges and universities are also doing severally a kind of work adapted to the higher ages of their enrollees. Additional special educational opportunities will also be available in 1948 and 1949 to adults who wish to study local and regional history and the social sciences.

Perhaps this is the time to mention some other state-wide activities which, like the agricultural and school programs, have local ramifications. The Centennial art committee is preparing exhibits in the fine and applied arts which will represent both the evolution and the achievement of Minnesota artists and art-craftsmen. Such exhibits will have both an aesthetic and a historical value. Ways are being explored for making these exhibits available to people in all parts of the state. The historic buildings committee is busy with a program of identifying and marking important structures. The Centennial staff is closely identified with the Folk Arts Foundation and kindred organizations, which are giving a Centennial direction to their efforts in the handicraft arts, music, dancing, and so on.

My second item under this classification of Centennial activities concerns what I may call local features, although you will already have noticed that the state-wide features just mentioned have local effects and implications. The underlying philosophy of the Centennial, as I have already pointed out, prescribes a broad popular celebration, and this means that by far the most important part of the observances will be carried on throughout the state by groups of citizens themselves. The Centennial staff is to act as the helper and co-ordinator in this process. Specifically, a Centennial committee is being set up in each county of Minnesota — a committee representative of all interests, economic, cultural, agricultural, social. This committee is to act as a co-ordinating group in the county and is charged with the task of seeing that some feature emphasizing the Centennial is introduced into the annual program of each group meeting in the county in 1949. It is charged with the duty of helping the Centennial staff in St. Paul to provide information and, in some instances, speakers, scripts, and performers for such programs. It is further charged with the duty of helping to spread information about the state-wide program features as they may appeal or apply to the people of the county. The chairmen of these county committees will be officers of local historical societies wherever possible, though the membership of such committees must, of course, include persons who truly represent all participating groups of citizens. The idea is to insure that every farm organization, every trade and professional organization, every chamber of commerce, every co-operative, every church, every service club, every school will have at least one Centennial program during 1949. Centennial features should also be a part of the program at every county fair or similar community event.

It is hoped, moreover, that in each county, either under the auspices of the county Centennial committee or of some other group selected for the purpose, there may be one or more special historical or pioneer celebrations during 1949. Communities along the Red River trails, to pick a possible example, might concert in a series of celebrations featuring a trek from Pembina to the Twin Cities of a fur brigade with its Red River carts and oxen. Every county has

some significant historical event of this kind which could form the basis of a festival. The staff of the Minnesota Historical Society and of the Centennial will assist in working out programs of this nature. Co-ordinated effort is necessary in order to insure that such celebrations do not conflict in timing with each other or with the state pageants already mentioned.

Among the publicity aids for celebrations of the kinds referred to, and as aids to general information about Minnesota and the Centennial, I must mention briefly a very few. There are a number of these aids which will have state-wide scheduling and distribution, but some may be made available for particular communities at special times. There are already available, for instance, many films dealing with Minnesota subject matter. The Centennial staff has a list of them and will tell any community how to get them. The Centennial staff has a list of volunteer speakers qualified to talk on appropriate topics and can help communities by suggesting one or more. There will be available in 1949 much published material, most of it prepared by private concerns but some of it prepared by the Minnesota Historical Society, which will be of use in connection with local celebrations. There will also be available Centennial radio scripts suitable for use by local broadcasting stations. The Centennial staff is prepared to make suggestions about getting and using these materials.

By way of general publicity for 1949, the Centennial staff hopes to have special films which will receive state-wide distribution through movie houses; and the radio industry in the state has already offered to give time on the air for extensive Centennial broadcasts. The Centennial staff will also have several publications, among them a manual of suggestions for local observances, which will be ready soon, a memorial brochure of general interest and permanent value, and study materials in Minnesota history for use by schools and by adult groups. In addition, there will be a continuous emphasis on the Centennial throughout 1949 by editors of the state press and of local magazines and house organs. These persons are already receiving the regular press releases of the society and they have given excellent co-operation to our publicity department by publishing both news items and feature stories. Efforts are under

way also to secure articles about the state and its Centennial in prominent national publications during 1949. A committee has been at work for some time on a commemorative coin, which the United States mint opposes and which we may not get, and on a stamp and postal cachet, both of which we probably will get. The 1949 auto license plates will advertise the Centennial. Many slogans for the Centennial have been suggested. None offered to date is any better, in the opinion of the staff, than the simple legend on the stationery of the Minnesota Historical Society: "1849 Minnesota Territorial Centennial 1949." All users of business stationery and of advertising space are urged to employ this legend whenever and wherever possible.

Now, in conclusion, I should like to say something about the objectives of the Centennial. First of all, lest I have given the impression that the celebration is to be a long-faced affair, I should like to put emphasis upon the desirability of mixing fun with the programs I have described. The social aspect of all parts of the celebration is very important, and something of the carnival spirit should prevail during the entire Centennial year. After all, who wants a lugubrious birthday party? Yet the basic idea of the Centennial is serious. The prime objective is the finding or the creation of a great body of citizens of all ages and of every status who are interested in Minnesota and its history. This interest should be zealous and proprietary. It should ultimately be measured in intensity by a simple test: Is it deep enough and durable enough to induce its possessors to join and to support historical societies for the study of the past and the discovery and preservation of historical objects and information? Unless the interest we uncover or arouse comes from all parts of the state and is sufficiently durable to maintain itself as I have suggested, we shall not have made the Centennial a true success. By the end of 1949 or soon thereafter we should have the state blanketed by local historical societies.

In thus glorifying the study of history, I can assure you that I do not seek to picture the future Minnesota as a paradise for pedants. I am thinking of history not as an esoteric specialty of our schools and colleges, but as a layman's key to conduct and guide to judg-

ment. As Ranke wrote, "History has had assigned to it the task of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of ages to come." What we seek is a detailed and intimate knowledge of what we have been, in order that we may know what we are and what we may become. As Edward Everett said in Concord in 1824 upon the visit of Lafayette to that hallowed spot, "How is the spirit of a people to be formed and animated and cheered but out of the storehouse of its historic recollections?"

For some reason, perhaps because of the new psychology and what Hitler and Stalin have done with it, perhaps because of the Aladdin's-lamp nature of our recent technological advances culminating in the philosopher's stone of nuclear fission, we as a people, and especially our youth, have fallen into a belief in unbelief, a cynical, or at least perplexed, skepticism which asserts that the past has no lessons for us. Because new discoveries about our environment and about our power over it have changed the practices of living so rapidly, we assume that human nature has changed too. Something has happened which, like our calendar, breaks the continuity of history and for most minds erects on the highway from the past a veiled doorway which should not be there. Does history repeat itself then? No. The assumption of the circularity of events, or at least of political and social thinking, is probably based upon an illusion. The wheel never does "come full circle," as Edmund says in *King Lear*; in thinking so we would forget the extension of the circle in time. It has three dimensions, not merely two; it is really an advancing spiral, not a circle at all. We never return to the exact spot occupied in some former age. History does not repeat itself; but man does repeat himself. And the discovery of one new dimension does not justify discarding the other two. It is still true that human nature is relatively a constant, and that in history like effects proceed from similar causes.

What we seek through this state-wide courting of the past during the Centennial is at least in part a revival of the springs of our faith, of old ideals and aspirations, a reassertion of a past confidence in the individual and in his powers, a firmness of belief which mocks the bewilderment of the over-gregarious present. As Burke put it:

"Society is indeed a contract. . . . But the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement . . . to be taken up for a little temporary interest. . . . It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born." This partnership, which—partly by means of the Centennial—we hope to widen until it includes every Minnesotan, should be one of the most stimulating and upholding relationships of our times, reviving our energies and giving them once more the purposes of a fellowship of free-willed souls. Von Mirandola, in his essay on "The Dignity of Man," makes God say to Adam: "I have created you neither heavenly, nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal, that you may with more dignity and freedom mould yourself into what you will. In you is the seed to debase yourself to what is lowly and vile; but you also have wherewith to rise again, by the reversal of your spirit, to things lofty and divine."



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