

WAR HISTORY WORK IN MINNESOTA¹

When the United States entered the World War, the Minnesota Historical Society, in common with other historical agencies the country over, considered ways and means whereby it might be of special service to the state and the nation. There appeared to be two kinds of wartime service which would come appropriately within the sphere of activity of such an institution: first, the dissemination of knowledge of the historical background of the war in order that the people of the state might understand more fully the issues at stake and that, understanding, they might contribute more vigorously to the winning of the war; and second, the collection and preservation of the materials for the history of Minnesota's contribution toward the winning of the war. It was soon recognized, however, that much of the needed educational work would be done by other agencies, both state and national, and that the society would find its special usefulness in the field of war history. For this reason, and also because the preservation of current material is one of its normal functions, the society, from the very beginning of American participation in the conflict, has been active both in the collection of local war history material through the usual channels and in the initiation and direction of a movement to prosecute the work on a large scale through the concerted efforts of citizens and communities throughout the state.

One of the first things which the society did was to enlarge the scope of its newspaper collection with special reference to war-time conditions and to provide facilities for making the war material in the papers readily available to investigators. To the long list of Minnesota newspapers already being

¹ A paper read at the twelfth annual meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, St. Louis, May 9, 1919, somewhat revised and brought up to date.

received from all parts of the state, there were added a number of publications reflecting war-time opinions and conditions which differed from those set forth in the general run of papers. Files of papers published at the training camps where Minnesota men were gathered in numbers, together with a file of the *Stars and Stripes*, the official organ of the American Expeditionary Force, are among the more valued of the special war-time acquisitions of the newspaper department. In order that the great mass of local newspapers received and filed by the society during the period might be more readily usable as a war record, work was begun on a classified card index of all significant matters in these papers relating to local war activities and conditions.

Other departments were equally active. The library staff, normally charged as it is with the duty of securing copies or files of all Minnesota publications, other than newspapers, exercised increased vigilance in obtaining those books, pamphlets, and periodicals which were the direct product of war conditions. The manuscript department acquired a number of interesting collections of soldiers' letters and miscellany relating to the experiences of individual Minnesotans in the service. Some little ephemeral printed matter, including several hundred war posters, was collected by members of the staff in their comings and goings about St. Paul and Minneapolis and by the field agent of the society in his travels about the state. Through an arrangement with a photographer at Camp Dodge, and by gifts from interested persons, the society acquired a growing collection of individual and group photographs of Minnesota service men. A considerable number of souvenirs and trophies from the battlefields of France, in large part the gift of a World War veteran who is a member of the society, formed the nucleus of a permanent collection of war relics. As far as possible, these collections, or selections of representative material from them, were displayed in the museum both as interesting in themselves and as conveying to

the visiting public an idea of the character of war history material and of the importance of preserving it.

From the start it was realized that many of the state's war records, especially those of an ephemeral nature and those of purely local significance, would disappear unless the interest and coöperation of people in every community throughout the state were secured. The field agent of the society, therefore, in the course of visits made in some twenty counties during the war, undertook through articles in the local newspapers, by personal interviews with war workers, and by the enlisting of local collectors to ensure in some degree at least the preservation of the miscellaneous war records of these communities. The matter was also brought to the attention of widely distributed groups of people through papers read by representatives of the society at librarians' conventions and other gatherings. To promote the preservation of the records of the state's leading war agency, the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety, the society in July, 1917, drew up a list of suggestions, copies of which the commission sent to all its county directors, together with letters asking them to observe the request of the historical society as an instruction from the commission.

It soon became evident, however, that a mere extension of the society's activities would not suffice, but that what was needed was something on the order of the familiar war-time "drive," conducted by a state-wide organization, specially created, named, and financed for the purpose. To fill this need the most obviously effective method of procedure was to secure the further coöperation of the public safety commission. Accordingly, after a thorough canvass of the local situation, and after an extended investigation of the work being done in other states, a plan was drawn up which was laid before the commission on August 27, 1918. It was suggested that the commission appoint a body to be known as the Minnesota War Records Commission; that this body effect the organization and direct the activities of county war records committees

through the appointment and instruction of a local representative, or county chairman, in every county in the state; and that an appropriation of one thousand dollars be made by the public safety commission to defray the expense of the work. It was understood that the society would permit its field agent to act as director of the proposed commission and would place at the commission's disposal its facilities for the care and preservation of the material collected. The plan was adopted and on October 8 the Governor appointed a body of twelve to serve as the Minnesota War Records Commission.²

Having met and organized on October 29 the commission adopted a plan of action which was shortly afterward elaborated and published in the form of a bulletin entitled *A State-wide Movement for the Collection and Preservation of Minnesota's War Records*. Broadly stated, the object of the commission is to collect and preserve, in state and county war records collections, all available material relating to Minnesota's part in the World War and to the altered course of life in Minnesota communities during the war period. The broadest possible interpretation is given to the phrase "war records"; no pertinent material, of whatever variety of origin, content, or form, is overlooked. Most easily recognized as war records, of course, are materials relating to the activities of Minnesotans in the service or associated in one or another capacity with the armed forces of the nation. Equal importance is attached, however, to records which show the part played by the people at home in mobilizing the state's resources in support of the war. For compiling the service records of all Minnesota soldiers, sailors, and marines, the commission has provided blank forms, or questionnaires, calling for specific information about the individual's military or naval career and about his civil status before and immediately following his term of service. For the history both of individual and of group services, and especially of the innumerable home com-

² A brief account of the establishment of the commission appeared in the November BULLETIN (2: 579),

munity war activities, the commission lays great stress upon the importance of collecting "ready-made" records, that is, material which was produced in connection with the actual conduct of the various war activities and has only to be gathered and preserved. Not all this material is commonly thought of as "records" but many of the facts of Minnesota's war history will never be available to the historian except as they are found recorded without premeditation in such products of the times as files of local newspapers; miscellaneous printed matter, such as pamphlets, programs, and posters; manuscript material, such as minutes of proceedings, correspondence files, and official reports; pictorial records, such as photographs, motion picture films, sketches, and maps; and mementoes or museum material, such as badges, flags, trophies, and relics.

The better to accomplish its purpose the commission has adopted the plan followed in a number of other states of organizing local auxiliary committees, as a general rule on the basis of county divisions. In a given county, for example, a local representative, or county chairman, is appointed by the commission upon the recommendations of local residents. The county chairman, in turn, appoints a county war records committee, and further extends the organization of his county according to the particular needs of that community. On the basis of instructions then or later to be given by the commission, the county organization then proceeds with the work of assembling all available material relating to the part taken by that county in the war. Both in the work of organization and in that of collection the commission aims to keep in close touch with the county committee, offering suggestions and encouragement and receiving reports from time to time on the progress of the work.

The general plan for the disposition of material collected by the war records organization contemplates the building up of both county and state collections. County committees are encouraged to preserve such of the records collected by them

as are chiefly local in character in a county war records collection housed in the leading county library, the courthouse, or other suitable local depository. On the other hand, to the state collection would naturally come all records of state-wide significance, including those emanating from the state headquarters of the various war agencies, together with such duplicate local material as may be received from the county committees. All records acquired by the commission are deposited, as they accumulate, in the library and museum of the Minnesota Historical Society.

In carrying out its program the principal effort of the commission thus far has been to extend its organization to all parts of the state. At the present time county committees have been organized and are at work in sixty-eight counties. The movement has everywhere met with a gratifying response. The tone and content of replies to the preliminary inquiries from the commission usually indicate a general recognition of the importance of the work, and a willingness, in some cases even amounting to eagerness, to cooperate in it. The commission has experienced little difficulty in securing the services of people of standing and ability as its local representatives; the list of county chairmen includes the names of local historians, school men, bankers, county officials, military men, editors, merchants, and lawyers. County committees averaging about fifteen members, usually leaders in war work, from all parts of the county, have been organized by the chairmen under the direction of the commission. A number of the committees have received from local residents, organizations, city councils, and county boards, sums of money ranging from one hundred and twenty-five to one thousand dollars to cover the cost of stationery and postage, clerk hire, binding, filing equipment, and other requirements for an effective conduct of the work. Various local organizations and institutions, including schools, churches, newspapers, and of late, associations of returned soldiers have shown a disposition to cooperate with the war records organization.

Of course the county committees attack their problems with varying degrees of vigor and resourcefulness. Their work, being for the most part voluntary, is subject to interruptions and delays, and as a rule, proceeds slowly. A great deal naturally depends upon the chairman's understanding of the problem and his ability and determination to find ways and means of getting the work done. In some cases, it must be admitted, the simplest instructions of the commission appear to have been but partially mastered and carried into effect, while on the other hand a number of chairmen and committees have elaborated the commission's necessarily general directions in ways suggested by their superior knowledge of local possibilities and needs. In a number of instances, the chairman, recognizing the size and importance of the task to be accomplished, has carried the organization of the county to the remotest townships and villages, accomplishing this purpose either in person or by means of letters enclosing printed instructions, blank forms, and other matter prepared by him or by his committee. There are instances also of county chairmen and committees collecting certain classes of material not specifically named in the commission's fairly elaborate exposition of what is meant by "war records." One chairman has been unusually successful in finding ways and means to catch the public eye and give the movement prestige: he has made use of hand bills distributed throughout the county and of motion picture advertisements bearing requests for war history material; he has published appeals through the local newspapers and has addressed public gatherings on the subject; he has secured the endorsement of the board of county commissioners for the work of his committee and has induced that board to appropriate one thousand dollars for its support. That he has been successful in popularizing the work is indicated by the fact that the county's military service records are not being typed, as is often the practice in other counties, because the citizens desire the honor of compiling these records in their own handwriting. His committee is also one of sev-

eral which are planning to publish histories of the parts taken by their counties in the prosecution of the war. It is the purpose of one committee to make of its county war records collection a permanent memorial of the war services performed by that community in lieu of a monument or other type of memorial.

The local committees, almost without exception, are applying themselves particularly to the compilation of the individual military service records for which printed forms have been supplied by the commission. In most cases these records are being filled out in duplicate, one set for the state war records collection, the other, for the county collection. Next in favor with the local workers appears to be the collection of soldiers' photographs and letters, files of local newspapers, and written reports on the activities of the several local war agencies. In the case of photographs, the planning and staging of public exhibits has proved an especially effective method of assembling such material for permanent preservation, a collection of about four thousand photographs of soldiers and views of war-time scenes having been acquired in this manner by one of the city committees acting in coöperation with other local organizations. A number of committees have been very successful in their efforts to secure complete files of all local newspapers published during the war, and some of them have commenced the work of indexing the files or of making up scrapbooks of clippings taken from duplicate files. There is undoubtedly a tendency to overlook some of the less obviously significant or pertinent material, especially among the so-called ready-made records, but there is ample evidence that a considerable amount of valuable materials of all kinds has been secured.

Although preoccupied, especially during the first few months, with the work of organizing and directing its local committees, the commission has given attention to the direct acquisition of material which, with the regular and special accumulations of the historical society, is to form the state war

records collection.³ In this direction the most notable results of late weeks have been accomplished with the assistance of a field agent whose services were loaned to the commission during May and June by the historical society and who has since been employed by the commission as its permanent field representative. Through him the commission has been able to follow up published and written appeals with a personal canvass of the state headquarters of nearly all the leading national agencies such as the food administration, the fuel administration, the war loan organization, the United States Employment Bureau, the army, navy, and marine recruiting stations, the American Red Cross, the Y. M. C. A. War Council, the American Protective League, and the Salvation Army. The offices of the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety, the Home Guard and Motor Corps, the University of Minnesota, and the William Hood Dunwoody Industrial Institute have also been canvassed. Among other significant material yielded by this preliminary and as yet uncompleted survey may be noted: a quantity of pamphlets, posters, circular letters, blank forms, and other publicity material and working paraphernalia of the several war agencies; original manuscript records such as the correspondence files of the Minnesota branch of the Y. M. C. A. War Council; a list of the names of all marines who enlisted in Minnesota in 1917 and 1918, together with the dates of enlistment and names and addresses of the nearest of kin; a collection of several hundred photographs of men who enlisted in the army at Minnesota recruiting stations; and copies of all chapter histories prepared by the county and local branches of the Red Cross in Minnesota so far as these histories have been completed and filed at the northern division headquarters. Unfortunately for local historical interests a most important class of records, the original files and official records of the state branches of federal war

³ The general character of this phase of the commission's activities is brought out in the notes on war history activities which have appeared in the *BULLETIN* beginning with the February, 1919, issue.

agencies such as the food administration, are destined under existing laws and regulations to be deposited in the national archives, and a great many of them have already been sent to Washington. In the belief that such records would be more useful if left in the custody of the state where they originated, the commission has joined with similar bodies in other states in a movement to persuade Congress to direct their return to states applying for them and in a position, as is Minnesota, to care for them properly.

The magnitude of the work undertaken by the commission and the desirability of placing it on a more permanent and substantial footing than was possible at the start early became apparent. The sudden ending of the war soon after the commission was established opened up possibilities and created demands with which this provisional body, without funds of its own, could not deal in the most effective manner. As the work proceeded it appeared desirable not only that the collecting of war records be accelerated and expanded but also that the state provide for the preparation and publication of a suitable memorial record of the part which its citizens played, individually and collectively, in the war. In January the public safety commission set aside another thousand dollars for the war records work, but only that it might be carried forward until the legislature, then recently convened, should have an opportunity to make more adequate and permanent provision for the carrying out of so extensive a program. During the period of the legislative session, therefore, the commission was occupied to a large extent with measures taken to secure the enactment of laws which, as already noted in these pages,⁴ have resulted in the establishment of the commission as a statutory body with a fund of ten thousand dollars for the work of this biennium, and in the opening up of local sources of revenue to the county committees working under its direction. The newly established commission met and organized

⁴ In the May BULLETIN (3:102).

on July 19.⁵ Although directed among other things to prepare and publish a comprehensive state war history, work upon which it was hoped could be commenced at once, the commission will necessarily devote itself during the next two years to the large and more immediately important task of collecting material. Whether or not the projected history will be published depends upon the action taken by future legislatures.

It is not to be understood that the commission and the historical society are the only agencies in Minnesota which are active in the field of local war history. The pictorial section of the historical branch of the war plans division of the general staff of the United States Army, for example, has its local representatives in Minnesota and other states who are collecting photographic material for the national archives. The University of Minnesota has employed a clerk to compile and collect records relating to war services of the university, its teachers, students, and alumni. The Minnesota Educational Association has compiled and published a roster of school men in the service. The Catholics of the state are perfecting an organization for war history work under the direction of the National Catholic War Council. Some twenty-four local newspaper publishers are known to have issued or to be planning the publication of county war histories as private ventures. These are but a few instances of many projects which have been initiated independently of the war records organization. The province of the latter, aiming as it does to cover all phases of Minnesota's war history, is, so far as possible, to coordinate all efforts put forth in this field, to encourage all worthy projects whatever their origin and management, and in general to see that all the possibilities are fully realized.

FRANKLIN F. HOLBROOK

MINNESOTA WAR RECORDS COMMISSION
ST. PAUL

⁵ See *post*, p. 157.



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