

The Minnesota Historical Society in 1948¹

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THE FIRST TIME I had the pleasure of stepping on Minnesota soil was on June 9, 1948. I shall never forget that pleasure. On that day, I came here a complete stranger. Dean Theodore C. Blegen, whom I had met one evening in Washington, D.C., in a manner quite accidental so far as I was concerned, invited me to make a brief visit here with the expectation, I presume, that I might possibly fill the role of director of the Minnesota Historical Society. I soon found that the society's executive council alone, while numbering only thirty individuals, embraced some of the most active, as well as distinguished, names among the state's citizenry. Further than that, the membership of the society was impressive as a roster of people from all walks of life. It was evident that here in Minnesota there was an interest in history and a support for a broad historical program which could hardly be duplicated in the United States today. That public interest was represented by an institution which was ninety-nine years old. No wonder the name Minnesota Historical Society was so well known across the nation! A brief tour of its building, first impressions upon meeting the staff, and a glimpse of the promising Territorial Centennial program, in the hands of an experienced administrator who is a member of the executive council and directly responsible to that body, each gave sufficient testimony that here was a great institution. Everyone I met was cordial. Here people were friendly and energetic.

When I returned to Minnesota on August 11 to assume my new duties, I received from the society's experienced and competent staff not only a warm welcome, but I found its members interested in

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helping me acclimate myself. Assurance came from other quarters as well. The society is most fortunate to have the vital and devoted leadership which it has in its president, Mr. Bergmann Richards. In the year since he took office he has been alert to interest able people in the society; and he has shown his vision of its future by outlining a broad program for popularizing the institution and its work. I want to take this opportunity to record my gratitude to him for the counsel he has constantly given me in a close personal relationship. My appreciation goes also to the executive committee in the support it has given certain proposals which I have been anxious to put into effect. This report would not be factual if it did not contain a mention of still other men who have shown extraordinary interest in the society, especially during the latter part of 1948: Judge Kenneth G. Brill, Dr. Solon J. Buck, Mr. Homer P. Clark, Dr. Guy Stanton Ford, Mr. Frank B. Hubachek, Lieutenant Colonel Arthur J. Larsen, and Dean Julius M. Nolte.

Upon my arrival, at once it became apparent that my new duties were both fascinating and manifold. I found here a vital and progressive institution, but one which was, at the same time, experiencing severe growing pains. As a state attains maturity, and the struggle involved in setting its pattern for development is more or less accomplished, there is an awakening of cultural interests among its people. Minnesota, at the end of its first hundred years, is emerging from its youth and is now entering upon its maturity. And Minnesota's people are growing more and more conscious of the intellectual aspects of their lives. This awakening interest naturally has increased the demands made by Minnesota's citizens upon the cultural institutions of the state — and not least upon the Minnesota Historical Society. This was growing more and more apparent even before the Territorial Centennial, which has enormously multiplied requests for the society's services, began to stimulate interest in local backgrounds. The society must hold and consolidate this awakened and increased appreciation of Minnesota's history. But it cannot do what it must do with its present small staff and its insufficient funds. The urgent need for a larger staff and greater financial resources is the basic and immediate problem which confronts the society

today. As I report to you the activities of the past year, you will see how that need is involved in each one of them.

For the society's Centennial office, under the direction of Dean Nolte, 1948 was a busy year. It was chiefly a year of organization and preparation. State-wide committees were organized to commemorate Minnesota's growth in the fields of agriculture, art, industry, music, and religion; others on coin and stamp, cachet, historic buildings and markers, pageants, speakers, and schools were established to devise and promote special methods of marking the 1949 anniversary. Most of these committees have been hard at work, and have already achieved some important results. As the result of the efforts of over twenty-five hundred volunteer workers throughout the state, who contributed generously of their time, labor, and money to promote the program sponsored and supervised by the society through its Centennial office, Centennial committees have been organized in most of Minnesota's counties and communities. To integrate Centennial activities, as well as to promote co-operation and better understanding, a monthly mimeographed *News Letter*, containing announcements and suggestions, was sent out from the Centennial office to the numerous committees. In addition, more than a hundred and forty different bulletins and releases have been prepared and mailed through the Centennial office.

Under the direction of the school committee, headed by Dean Horace Morse of the University of Minnesota general college, five important publications to aid in the teaching of state history in the schools were issued and distributed through the Centennial office. It also has taken care of the printing and distribution of the *Gopher Historian*, a magazine established by the society and edited by Dean Morse and Professor George McCune for the Gopher Historian chapters in the schools of the state. If the society's school program is to continue after the Centennial year — and continue it must — a Gopher Historian supervisor should be added to the staff.

Among other Centennial publications issued or planned by the society — time does not permit me to mention all of them — are Mary W. Berthel's *Horns of Thunder*, published last November; a forthcoming history of agriculture in Minnesota by Merrill E.

Jarchow, which is sponsored by the committee on agriculture and will be published this year; and a Centennial brochure written by L. W. Nelson and Merrill Cragun of the society's Centennial staff and published and distributed through the courtesy of the Minnesota Bankers' Association.

The enthusiasm with which the Centennial is being received is most encouraging. Industry, the professions, organizations of all kinds, and individuals throughout the state are responding to it wholeheartedly. It is obvious that the society must do everything possible to hold the interest in Minnesota history that is being stimulated by the Centennial celebration.

While the Centennial preparations and activities necessarily have placed, and will continue to place, a still heavier load upon our already overburdened permanent staff, nevertheless the normal work and activities of the society have been carried on with efficiency.

Dr. Carlton C. Qualey, who had been superintendent of the society since July 16, 1947, was forced to resign on June 15, 1948, because of temporary ill health. He has resumed full-time work as professor of history at Carleton College. The society's librarian, Mr. Russell F. Barnes, served as acting superintendent until August 11. Certain projects initiated under their leadership, and even earlier, during the administrations of Colonel Larsen and Dr. Lewis Beeson, were not brought to fruition until the late months of 1948. Therefore this report cannot attempt to bestow individual credit on any of the several people involved in certain accomplishments. This is especially true of the organization and development of county historical societies, the Gopher Historian program, the Centennial program, and various publications planned for 1949.

The total number of members who joined the society in 1948 was 423, but, unfortunately, deaths and withdrawals reduced the gain over 1947 to 260. A year ago the society's total membership was 2,083. When the last count was made in December, the figure stood at 2,343—far too small a membership in a state with Minnesota's population. If each of the society's members during the coming year would obtain at least one new member, obviously our member-

ship would be doubled. There could be no better time for such a project than the Centennial year.

One indication of the society's progress is the continued growth of its collections. During the past year the library accessioned 2,440 new books, a slight increase over the number recorded in 1947, and it is significant that over seventy-four per cent of them were received as gifts. In the manuscript division 156 new accessions, including many hundreds of individual items, were recorded. Among them were copies of materials from other depositories, such as Mrs. Joseph Ullmann's reminiscences of pioneer life in early St. Paul, and letters and documents of Minnesota interest from the Robert Todd Lincoln collection in the Library of Congress. Among other manuscripts received may be mentioned a folder of business papers of Alsop Brothers Red River Freight Line of Moorhead, dating from 1883 and 1884, and additions to the Henry M. Rice Papers.

The society is now receiving each week about eight hundred newspapers, by far the largest number of which originate in Minnesota. Noteworthy among the gifts received in the newspaper department in 1948 is a file of the *Askov American* for the years from 1914 to 1925, which supplements a previous file that began with the latter year; twenty-four bound volumes of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and *St. Paul Dispatch* for 1947; the *Nobles County Review* for the period from 1926 to 1939; and an incomplete bound file of a hitherto unknown paper, the *Western Progress* of Brownsville for 1869-70.

The collections of the museum were increased in 1948 by more than two hundred individual gifts. They include such varied objects as costumes; ethnological items; early toys; pictures, among them an impressive portrait in oil of James J. Hill and photographs made by St. Paul's first professional photographer, Joel E. Whitney; cigar-makers' tools; a lantern-slide projector of the 1880's; a bronzed plaster bust of Frank B. Kellogg; and the flag flown over Manila by General Arthur MacArthur in 1898 and again in 1945 by his son, General Douglas MacArthur.

The routine work of accessioning, cataloguing, and arranging the society's extensive and valuable collections, and of guarding them against deterioration, unspectacular as it is and hidden from

the public eye, is among the most important functions of the institution. Without it the society could not operate. Books, newspapers, manuscripts, pictures, and museum objects must be recorded as they are received, and they must be catalogued and arranged in orderly fashion if they are to be of service to the public. Despite the added demands of the Centennial and the fact that the society is woefully understaffed, progress in all this work has been notable during the past year. The library, for example, catalogued 13,352 titles, an increase of 2,434 over 1947. Nevertheless, in the library's catalogue division, as well as in most departments of the society, it has been impossible to keep up current work with a small staff, and unfinished work is rapidly accumulating.

A conspicuous achievement of 1948 in the library was the installation of flooring in the lowest level of the stacks. Lights and bookstacks will be installed during the coming year. A special project of the library accessions division involved the moving, cleaning, listing, and arranging of duplicates, and resulted in their disposal. The library reference department, which serves the public directly, lost the valuable services of the reference librarian, Miss Lois M. Fawcett, who resigned in September to take a more lucrative position. The difficulty that the society is experiencing in replacing her demonstrates that its salaries are far below those of similar institutions.

On July 1, 1948, the manuscript division, which had been placed under the custody of the library in 1946, was restored to its previous status as an independent department of the society, and Miss Lucile Kane was named curator. With an inadequate staff, but a great deal of imagination and zeal, Miss Kane has begun to carry out well-laid plans for bringing order to the department, accentuating the program of collecting, simplifying office procedures, and continuing a series of publications about the collections. Many of these plans must remain on paper until she has a staff sufficient to put them into operation. While the work of cataloguing, mending, sorting, and cleaning manuscripts has progressed during the year, the department is far behind in current work. There, again, a backlog is piling up.

Although his staff, too, is inadequate, Mr. Willoughby M. Babcock has brought the current work of the newspaper department up to date and has inaugurated a difficult microfilming program. His department has succeeded in putting on film all daily issues of newspapers in the society's collection for the year 1946, plus seven papers published during the years from 1849 to 1855. Since the work of microfilming newspapers began in March, ten thousand feet of film have been run off. At this rate it is impossible more than to offset the inflow of current papers. An estimate dismally indicates that, with the present small staff, it will take forty years to accomplish the society's program for filming its newspapers in order to reduce their bulk for storage.

The society's museum is being completely renovated in preparation for the Centennial celebration. A beginning was made by re-decorating the entire third floor of the Historical Building early in the year. A program is now under way whereby, as far as possible, showcase exhibits will be replaced by large, open, and atmospheric exhibits, such as period-room interiors. It will take years fully to accomplish this program. Four shells were constructed in the west gallery, in which room interiors have been arranged. Two of them reproduce historic St. Paul interiors of the territorial period — James M. Goodhue's print shop and Harriet Bishop's log schoolhouse. All outmoded showcases formerly used in the museum have been loaned to county historical societies, which sorely need them, and the state society's inadequate storage facilities are relieved of a serious burden.

Another museum change that offers great possibilities for the future is the fitting up of the south gallery and the adjoining corridors for a series of changing art shows. The first, an exhibit of Minnesota portraits, has been installed, and five more have been planned for the Centennial year. It is expected that each will be announced with appropriate fanfare, and the significance of the society's enormous picture collection will at least be indicated. Months of work lie ahead, however, before the museum can be considered ready for the Centennial year, and, with the usual lack of staff, the task is herculean.

The work of renovating and reorganizing the museum greatly curtailed its exhibition program in 1948. It was, in fact, closed to the public for more than two months. Its holdings, however, were in demand for display elsewhere—at the Minnesota State Fair in St. Paul and at the National Food Show in Minneapolis, among other places. The museum loaned for exhibit outside the Historical Building more than a hundred objects, and it made available for reproduction more than eleven hundred pictures. Requests for the use of items from the society's tremendous collection of over a hundred and eighty thousand catalogued pictures have increased enormously in the past few years, even before the stimulus of the Centennial began to be felt. The society has over thirty thousand portraits alone. Furthermore, it has several thousand pictorial items that have never been catalogued and thus are unavailable during this important year of 1949. In order to make it of real service to the public, the collection should be completely reorganized and made readily available to the public, which is beginning to draw heavily upon its very extensive resources. But that cannot be accomplished without additions to the staff. The proper administration of the picture collection requires the services of a special curator and an assistant.

Centennial activities have stimulated increased activity in the editorial department. As editor of *Minnesota History*, Miss Bertha L. Heilbron has injected the Centennial theme into the society's magazine by publishing appropriate articles, documents, and illustrations. The fact that printing costs increased more than twenty per cent over the previous unheard-of peak, and that her limited budget remained almost static, made her success in the past year more noteworthy. She is serving on the state-wide Centennial art committee, which is doing spectacular work on behalf of the celebration, and on three art committees of more limited scope.

Mrs. Berthel, the society's associate editor, made the year notable with the publication of her *Horns of Thunder: The Life and Times of James M. Goodhue*. The editing of other Centennial publications and releases, preliminary work in editing two other books to be published by the society, the writing and publishing of twelve issues

of *News for Members*, and numerous other tasks involving a large amount of research, writing, and editing were among her accomplishments during the past year.

The society's two editors, Mrs. Berthel and Miss Heilbron, except for temporary help during emergencies, have been without an assistant since the depression of the 1930's, when the society's budget was drastically cut. The executive committee, recognizing the urgent need for a full-time editorial assistant, last year made temporary provision for such an addition to the staff. It is imperative that this position be placed on a permanent basis through provision in the state budget for an editorial assistant.

The society's research associate, Dr. Grace Lee Nute, in addition to her many contributions to various periodicals, completed the writing of a history of the Rainy River basin, which will be published as a companion volume to her popular *Voyageur's Highway*. The forthcoming publication is made possible through the generosity of the Minnesota and Ontario Paper Company. Dr. Nute also has been working on a history of the Minnesota iron ranges. For that work a substantial sum has been advanced by the United States Steel Corporation, through a subsidiary, the Oliver Iron Mining Company.

Several members of the staff, notably Dr. Nute, Mr. Barnes, and Miss Heilbron, have carried their professional interests into activities connected with organizations other than the society. There is a large and growing demand for speakers from the staff to address numerous clubs and other organizations. Among those who have responded to such requests during the past year are Dr. Nute, Mr. Babcock, Mrs. Berthel, Mr. G. Hubert Smith, Mr. Barnes, Miss Kane, and Miss Esther Jerabek — some of them many times. Mrs. Berthel heads a staff committee which undertakes to supply speakers.

A difficult problem confronting the society is the serious bottleneck presented by the administrative office, through which most of the society's business must be channeled. The creation on the staff of an executive position, to be filled by an individual who can assist the director and manage the work of the office, is an urgent need. Needed also is a secretary to administer the affairs of the field

director when he is out in the field. As county historical societies have increased in number and expanded their activities, their need for service from the state society has multiplied to such an extent that the field director alone can no longer handle them.

Some indication of the growth of the field director's work is to be found in the steadily increasing number of local historical societies in Minnesota. Twelve were organized in 1948, raising the total to sixty-nine. It is hoped that by the end of the Centennial year, every county in the state will have its own society, and that in addition many communities and regions will have active groups organized for the purpose of exploiting local historical resources. The state society is under a serious obligation to these local groups, which, if they are to receive financial support from their county commissioners, must be affiliated with the parent organization as institutional members. There is urgent need for funds not only to enable the field director to visit local groups throughout the state, but also to finance trips by the state society's director and other staff members who frequently are called upon to speak before meetings of the local societies or to help their leaders solve special problems. If a local historical society in Winona or Detroit Lakes, for example, needs help in planning or arranging its museum, the state society should be in a position to send there a member of its museum staff who can give expert advice and guidance. Only with adequate funds for travel can the state society help local organizations solve problems involved in recording, cataloguing, arranging, and making available to local communities museum objects, books, and manuscripts, in planning and printing publications of various types, and in staging celebrations and other historical attractions. The state society also should be ready to furnish program materials, such as pictorial film slides, and it should have ready for the use of local leaders guidebooks and forms that will help them meet specific needs. It is evident that only with an increase in staff and financial resources can the state society keep alive and active, and thus fulfill its obligations to the local historical agencies that are springing up all over the state.

The administration and much of the actual work of the Min-

nesota State Archives Commission falls to the lot of the society. The director of the Minnesota Historical Society is also the secretary of the commission. It was created by the Minnesota legislature on April 26, 1947, in order to arrange for the orderly destruction of state records that have outlived their usefulness and to provide for the preservation and servicing of records that have permanent legal, historical, or administrative value. The commission is making good progress toward the implementation of the responsibility laid down by the law, which provides for the destruction of many types of records after they have been photographed on microfilm. Obviously, the storage space needed for the film is but an infinitesimal part of that required for the original records. In 1948 the work of reducing the tremendous bulk of noncurrent state records was advanced by photographing on 27,500 feet of film more than 2,500,000 pages of documents in the state archives.

In October the commission sent me as a delegate to the annual convention of the Society of American Archivists, which met at Raleigh, North Carolina; and in November and December I made an eight-day trip to investigate administrative procedures as practiced by the most successful public and private archives of several eastern cities. I also attended the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Washington, D.C. Appearances at professional meetings entail inestimable benefits for the Minnesota Historical Society. Delegates from many similar organizations, as well as from college and university history departments throughout the nation, gather at these meetings, and they expect a progressive institution such as this society to be represented. In addition, there are further benefits arising out of good will, public relations, and the gleaning of new ideas, which make such representation by the director highly desirable.

An affiliate of the Minnesota Historical Society, the Forest Products History Foundation, has formulated plans for a five-year program that will permit it to continue its pioneering research in the lumbering and forest products industries on a national scale and to publish the results. In the meantime, the foundation has had a successful year under the direction of Dr. Rodney C. Loehr, and

it has published two studies, C. M. Oehler's *Time in the Timber* (56 p.) and Mrs. Lillian M. Willson's *Forest Conservation in Colonial Times* (32 p.). The staff has been enlarged, and present and former members are now engaged in eleven different projects.

The last day of the year marked the completion of Dr. Philip D. Jordan's history of public health in Minnesota, the research for and writing of which was made possible by a grant from the Mayo Properties Foundation. There remains only the task of putting the manuscript through the final mechanical processes, and it is expected to be ready for publication by late spring.

The society is deeply grateful to the donors of the hundreds of books, newspapers, manuscripts, and museum objects presented during the past year. I wish I could mention each of them here. In addition to these gifts, the society received substantial sums of money in 1948 from interested and generous friends. A total of \$18,833.00 was given to the society to help finance the Forest Products History Foundation. This sum reflects the generosity of several different companies and individuals in the lumbering industry. To help meet the cost of publishing Dr. Nute's book on the Rainy River country, the Minnesota and Ontario Paper Company gave the society \$1,500.00, which, added to an identical sum contributed by the same company last year, makes a total subvention to date of \$3,000.00. A friend of the society contributed \$500.00 to purchase new equipment for the staff room, and \$500.00 toward an emergency fund. A gift from another friend of \$230.00 helped to pay for a color reproduction, in the June number of *Minnesota History*, of the society's newly acquired painting by Francis Lee Jaques; and the same loyal supporter gave \$100.00 to help finance membership promotion. Mr. Sinclair Lewis added \$50.00 to the society's publication fund. Two of the society's life members, Professor Wilbur H. Cherry of the University of Minnesota and Mrs. William Dean of St. Paul, expressed astonishment in recent letters because the society continues to send them publications without further payments. To help pay the expenses involved in their memberships, the first enclosed \$25.00 and the second \$10.00, and Mrs. Dean said that

she hoped to make hers the first of a series of annual contributions. The cordial attitude of these two conscientious and generous members only strengthens the realization that in a period of rising costs there is no magic which can be used to maintain traditional standards at the normal price level. Instead, there must be a slowing down in operation to keep quality intact. But we do not stop there. As I think this report testifies, we are making a constant struggle to improve the quality of the society's work. The society is most grateful not only for the gifts it has received, but also for the interest and confidence in its work which the gifts imply.

In conclusion, I wish to submit the following program for the Centennial year:

1. The society's membership should be doubled. By the end of 1949, five thousand members should be enrolled. Every member can help attain this goal, for our present members are our best advertisement.

2. The society's staff should be enlarged. The minimum specific needs are clarified in this report.

3. The society must give the broadest possible service to the state. This can be done to greatest advantage through the schools, which need more state history in the curriculum as well as the enlivening of all history teaching. The society can increase its service through its museum, the department best qualified to entertain and educate the public in general. Another opportunity for special service lies in the widest possible use of the society's building, not only in attracting visitors, but in providing space for appropriate meetings and social gatherings. The broad services here suggested would not only win more friends for the society throughout the state, but would also strengthen its ties with local historical societies.

4. The society should establish a children's museum, with displays especially interesting to young people. It should be equipped to present educational films, and should include story hours in its program.

5. The society must formulate a carefully considered program of public relations, which will incorporate not only publicity in the

press, but also the popularization of state history by means of radio and television. Good public relations begin with the staff and extend out to include the society's members. The society can accomplish wonders if its members are informed and active.

6. The society should institute an annual lecture program for adults, which will embrace not only history, travel, and current events, but provide supplementary attractions in the form of art and music.

7. To increase popular interest in the society and its work, a forward-looking promotional program is required. Such a program can bring unlimited benefits to the society if it takes into consideration both popular and scholarly standards.

8. The budget must be expanded to such an extent that the society will be enabled to meet all its responsibilities to the people of Minnesota. Funds must be provided for the maintenance of an adequate and able staff, with salaries that will hold its members in the society's service. In short, the budget must be large enough and broad enough first, to guarantee the perpetuation of the society's high standards, and, second, to meet adequately the increasing demands of the public for the society's services.

Finally, I should point out that this eight-point program can become a reality only if it has the support of everyone connected with the society. I am confident that the members of the executive council and the staff, as well as all members, would like to see this program become an accomplished fact. That is possible only with their undivided co-operation and help.

Among those who wrote to me at the time of my appointment to the directorship of the society was Professor Henry S. Commager, the well-known writer and historian of Columbia University. He said this of the society: "It is, as you doubtless know, a great historical society—surely one of the four or five greatest in the country." His remark is a great tribute. It is also a great challenge. The society's reputation must be jealously guarded, and its high standing among the historical societies of the nation must be maintained.



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