

Folk Culture and the Historical Society

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I APPRECIATE THIS OPPORTUNITY to come to St. Paul, for I am a truly provincial Easterner who tends to think of the Middle West as beginning with the Niagara frontier.¹ I must admit that in recent years, however, I have had contacts that have been reminding me with persistency that there is much to be said for Minnesota. One of these is my esteemed friend and colleague, James Taylor Dunn, who was born and grew up in this city and who now is the very able librarian of our New York State Historical Association. I notice that here at this head table sits Grace Lee Nute, to whom we in New York owe a real debt, because it was she more than anyone else who interested Jim Dunn in the relationship between the tasks of the librarian and those of the historian.

Out in the audience I see Philip Jordan, whom I haven't seen for nearly two decades, but who was a colleague of mine in our salad days. His writings on various aspects of American culture, particularly an article which he called "Toward a New Folklore" (in *Minnesota History* for December, 1946), bear a distinct relationship to what I shall say this afternoon. I want, also, to pay tribute to Dean Theodore Blegen, whose *Grass Roots History*, especially the first essay in that volume, is one of the most important documents of historiography in the first half of the twentieth century. For me it was a clear, concise statement of what, in a blundering and bumbling fashion, I had been trying to say myself, and I hope he will feel that this report of mine indicates that we of the State Historical Association in New York are carrying through with the philosophy of history expressed in that essay. While I looked forward to seeing these friends in St. Paul, I was also anxious to find out more about the way Mrs. F. K. Weyerhaeuser and my good friend, Harold Dean Cater, had developed the women's program for which Mrs. Weyerhaeuser was granted last year one of the coveted awards of the American Association for State and Local History. Their methods may well prove a model for other societies throughout the country.

The year 1949 was for you the one-hundredth anniversary of your society, and for the New York State Historical Association a fiftieth birth-

¹This was the principal address presented at the St. Paul Hotel on January 9, 1950, before the luncheon session of the one-hundred-and-first annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society. *Ed.*

day. My remarks will be a statement of what I consider certain guideposts which historical societies must follow in the second half of this century. Fortunately those who led the way have endowed us with a great heritage. The function of historical societies in the past has been, as your own Governor Alexander Ramsey stated, "the preservation . . . of materials for the composition of [state] history." It has been the collection of documents, the preservation of newspapers, the encouragement of historians to record from these documents scholarly histories of our areas. The earlier historians tended to emphasize our political, military, and constitutional history; they put their stress upon the leaders of movements and upon the early families who settled the various parts of this country. The most important of these forerunners, men like Solon J. Buck in your state and Dixon Ryan Fox in mine, have emphasized the necessity for sound and accurate scholarship. This, then, is the solid rock upon which we build a new structure of our time for historical societies, since it seems to me we would betray our trust and our traditions if we were satisfied to do no more than has been done in the past. We must continue publishing volumes and articles in our quarterlies which record the orthodox story of our past — its military, political, constitutional, and legal history — for this is the structure upon which the formal political life of the future must, to a certain extent, depend. But this is no longer enough. The day when a state historical society can think only in terms of a small, select group of scholars is finished. We must seek out new goals which are in sympathy and in keeping with the temper of the times in which we live.

It is not always easy to look at your own period of history and analyze it with any clarity, but certainly one does not need to be clairvoyant to recognize that we are living, and shall undoubtedly be living for some years to come, in a period of revolution. The suppressed peoples of the world are on the march. And even we in America are undergoing a revolution — happily for us an orderly and quiet one — which moves forward with an ever-increasing extension of our democratic ideals. It seems to me that only the blind, the fool, and the timid think this revolution is necessarily the ultimate triumph of Communism. It can mean just as easily, if we seize upon the opportunities offered, the flowering triumph of democracy itself. I believe most earnestly that one of the ways we can bring that to pass, and one of the ways by which we will keep from slipping into the Communist slough, is by bringing to the American people an increased understanding of the roots from which they come, of the cultures, native and foreign, which produced them.

Now you and I know perfectly well that a great proportion of our people, or any people, are unqualified to approach history with under-

standing and enthusiasm at the scholarly level, through the histories of military campaigns, the slow and tortuous legal steps by which we arrived at our basic freedoms, the inch by inch changes that have taken place in constitutional government. It is extremely difficult, nay almost impossible, to give the man in the street the scholar's concept of these important subjects. Our task is to give the man in the street and the woman in her kitchen a sense of their intimate relationship to the American past. We are a rootless, peripatetic people; few of us die in the same town in which we are born, and there are whole states in this Union inhabited by citizens the vast majority of whom were born elsewhere. Yet if they are to come to an understanding and appreciation of the relationship of the American past to the individual, we must help these restless people find roots of significance that they can strike down wherever they are in this land.

By and large historical societies have in the past made their appeal to scholars and scholarly amateurs. These people have been found in the upper middle class and most frequently in the families which were first in their coming. In terms of the world's needs, this is not enough. The historical societies of America must start thinking, in a way they have never thought before, about the workingmen and women who are the essential creators and defenders of our democratic faith, about the men and women who caught the later boats and whose children stand among us as proud, full-fledged citizens. To my way of thinking the soundest and most meaningful approach to these groups is by emphasis upon the preservation of their folk culture, upon that whole aspect of the past which the orthodox documentary historian has tended to neglect. If we are going to popularize the programs of the historical societies, then we will do well to concentrate a fair share of our energies in the next fifty years upon the traditional ways of life among our people, and particularly among those classes of our society whose story has been neglected.

Minnesota History has led the way in publishing articles relating to the folk culture of your state. In 1932 it published Agnes M. Larson's important article called "On the Trail of the Woodsman," which describes the folkways, the songs, the games, the foods, the folk tales of the loggers, and in the next two years came four important articles by Evadene Burreis on the frontier home, with emphasis upon housekeeping, food, architecture, furnishings, and management. In 1934 came Bertha Heilbron's study of the holidays on the frontier, and in 1939 a most interesting paper by LeRoy Davis on such frontier institutions as the country store, the school, and the smithy in the pioneer community. Repeatedly you have published Marjorie Edgar's studies of Finnish-American folklore, and

two years ago came Roy Swanson's article on the Swedish-American folk hero, Ola Värmlänning. *Minnesota History* has done a magnificent job of incorporating into a historical publication these and many other contributions to our understanding of Minnesota's folk culture.

In approaching the problem of American folk culture we all have to remember what you in Minnesota have known so long and have utilized so skillfully—namely that American culture is the product of many cultures. Indeed, the work of Alice Sickels, through the International Institute of St. Paul, where she found what she called so truly a "pattern in diversities," is a model for a land seeking to make an asset of its differences. I remember in the midst of the war sitting with a group of teachers college students and planning for the New York State College for Teachers in Albany a folk festival based upon Mrs. Sickels' volume, *Around the World in St. Paul*. The result was that young people of European backgrounds saw for the first time the merits in their inherited culture which no one before had taken the trouble to help them appreciate and recognize as worthy of preservation.

In my own state, while we began publishing folklore materials in *New York History* in 1936, we went a step farther, for in 1944, at a meeting of the New York State Historical Association, the New York Folklore Society was founded. The interests of these two organizations are carefully interwoven, with interlocking directorates; the executive director of the historical association is always a director of the folklore society; the Farmers' Museum, which the historical association operates, sponsors the *New York Folklore Quarterly*; and the conventions of the two organizations are held together. So far as the preservation of the various European cultures goes, the *New York Folklore Quarterly* has published during its five years the lore of Yorkers who had come from Holland, England, Ireland, Sweden, French Canada, Italy, Hungary, Wales, Czechoslovakia, Syria, Turkey, Greece, and China, as well as those of Negro, Indian, and Yankee strain. It seems to me that one of the purposes of articles of this sort and articles relating to older aspects of native American folk culture, whether printed in our publications or in a more popular medium, is to give to those who share these origins a fresh perspective upon their own roots, and to give those of us who share another culture pattern a basis for mutual understanding.

I hope historical societies will continue to foster in various ways the publication of folkloristic materials, but I think we must be realistic and recognize the fact that the printed page is growing less and less important in our time. As this century proceeds, the word will more often be heard than read, and much of our most important teaching will be done with

pictures rather than with the printed page. Education is rapidly becoming a visual matter, and in such a trend the museum at last comes into its own; but museums, if they are going to compete with and utilize radio and television and whatever else is ahead, must be dynamic. No longer can cases of rusty Civil War weapons or Revolutionary haberdashery represent education to the people whose standards have been set by habitual dramatic presentation. If we are going to tell the story of American history — and it is one of the great exciting epics of all time — then we must meet the challenge at this new level. Only the museum that is lively, where real people do real things, that encourages the visitor to touch and feel and hold within his hand the materials out of the past, will have a chance in such competition.

I also believe that there must be museums which will show the equivalent of what folklore does in print; in other words, we must have folk museums in this country, just as they have long had them in Scandinavia — museums which tell the story of our folk life. We are accustomed to what one might call upper-class museums, preserving the finest pictures, the finest silverware, furniture, and costumes which made up the material world of upper-class society, and as far as it goes that is right and proper. But we must also tell the story of the people who worked with their hands and created an American society out of the wilderness by the sweat of their brows and the ingenuity of their brains and hands.

Toward the achievement of this, our New York State Historical Association has made a number of interesting moves. We operate in Cooperstown, New York, two museums. One, known as Fenimore House, is essentially a museum of history and art. Here we have a notable collection of pictures by the genre painters who depicted folk life in New York state, and a rapidly growing and important collection of American folk art, with emphasis on the point at which craftsmanship becomes art. But it is our Farmers' Museum, our folk museum, which is perhaps the most dramatic achievement in this direction. It is a dynamic monument to the men and women who grew callouses on their hands. We are trying to gather together as many different aspects as possible of the life of the rural working people in our area from the clearing of the frontier to the Civil War.

Our main building was once a huge dairy barn, and here we house our important collections of tools and implements. Here, for example, are the implements of the frontier kitchen and those of the dairy and of cheese-making and of butchering. We tell here the story of washing and ironing, and show, I think with considerable clarity, the processes by which the wash tub with a log to pound the clothes gradually gave way,

through the gadgeteering instincts of the American farmer, to the washing machine. We tell the whole story of flax and wool. We grow the flax in our fields, ret it in our own ponds, brake it, swingle it, hetchel it, spin it, and weave it. We prepare and spin and weave wool. From the by-products of the flax we make rope. We have preserved the implements of the field: the plows and harrows, the implements of planting and harvesting. We have the tools of the craftsmen, but, most particularly, we have a carpenter at his bench using these tools, a broommaker at his primitive machine making brooms.

Beyond the main building we are developing a crossroads such as dotted the New York state landscape from the 1800's to the 1840's. A country schoolhouse, a country store, a blacksmith's shop, and a lawyer's office have been brought in from the countryside and are functioning. The store is stocked with produce, the schoolhouse is equipped with everything but children, and the smith is at his anvil, shoeing horses and making the same sort of metal products that the village blacksmith previously made. During the coming year we shall move onto the project an early New York state farmhouse and its barns and outhouses; at the door will bloom the flowers and herbs of the frontier wife. The fields behind the barn will grow our broomcorn, flax, hops, and Indian corn. There will be a pond for a few ducks, and the barns will house our team of oxen. This museum is not just an antique enthusiast's delight; it is a schoolhouse for Americans, designed to show them the rungs of the ladder by which our people have climbed to their present position. It is the focused reflection of the struggles we have passed through, for these we must understand or we are unarmed for the struggles which lie ahead.

Last year sixty-six thousand people walked through the doors of the Farmers' Museum, and most of these people were workers. Farm families and working-class families from the cities came with people of the older generation, the younger generation, and the middle generation. They looked, and they asked questions, and they listened, and if we are doing the job we have set out to do, they went away with a new sense of the historic importance of the American working classes, a sense of the historic importance of the American farmer and the American craftsman. It is our intention to see that the man who gathers up his family in his farmyard and must be back in time to do his milking, after a visit to us recognizes more clearly the purpose of his activities and sees himself and his work in historical perspective. We want the man who comes out of the factory to see his work in relation to the chap who used a foot-pedalled lathe, and we want the housewives who, in growing millions, have electricity as their maids of all work, to understand something of

the toil and the sacrifice of the pioneer mothers. We intend to emphasize in as many ways as we can the historic dignity of labor, and to impress upon the thousands who come to us that whatever their occupation, whatever their craft, it has its historical roots in the American story, and that their growth is fed by these roots.

We in New York recognize, as I know you in Minnesota recognize, that we have only begun to carry the story of our history to the general public, to the people themselves. It is my growing conviction that if we are to meet the obligations of the next half of this century, we must be ever alert and ever proud to share our understanding of the American past with all classes of our citizens, because a people who understands its heritage is strong against the day of trouble, immune against the allurements of specious political philosophies, and in a position to make clear to other peoples the values that lie in the proudly free state.

NOTICE FOR MEMBERS

WHY THE ANNUAL REPORT of the director, which followed Dr. Jones's address on the program of January 9, 1950, does not appear in this issue of Minnesota History is explained below on page 40. For the benefit of members who were unable to be present on that occasion, and for libraries and similar institutions that keep permanent records, Dr. Cater's review of the activities of "The Minnesota Historical Society in 1949," the Centennial year, will be issued in a limited edition. Copies will be sent to members and libraries requesting them as long as the supply lasts.



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