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The University and the Historical Society

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I COME BEFORE YOU TODAY with the slightly disquieting sense of being a brash young thing recklessly committed to the impudence of speaking a piece in the presence of his elders. At least the institution that I represent is, in comparison with the institution to which you give your loyalty, a juvenile who should know his place and keep to it.¹ The University of Minnesota will not be a hundred years old until a month from now, while the Minnesota Historical Society was a hundred years old more than a year ago. It is, as your literature does not hesitate to remind the rest of us Johnny-come-latelys, "the oldest institution in the state."

Perhaps you will forgive me for reminding you, in my turn, that there is no snobbery to compare with that of youth unless it is the snobbery of old age. A friend of mine was surprised and delighted to discover this several years ago, when she went, as newspaper reporter, on one of your historical society journeys into the past. It was part of her task to interview some of those "oldest living inhabitants" who always come into the full bloom of hardy perennials on such occasions. She had just finished talking with a splendid old creature who bore her ninety-five years as though they were the aegis of Athena, when, quite suddenly, the mask of divinity slipped to expose the face of mortal woman. My friend had excused herself, saying that she must try to find old Mrs. Bevan before the tour moved on. At the mention of old Mrs. Bevan's name, the eyes of the local equivalent of Pallas Athena narrowed into an expression of contemptuous distaste. "My dear," she said, "I must warn you against her. She'll try to tell you that she's one-hundred-and-one years old. But I happen to know"—and here she lifted a delicately veined hand to

¹ In commemoration of the one-hundredth birthday of the University of Minnesota, the author of its forthcoming centennial history presented this address before the one-hundred-and-second annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society. He spoke following a luncheon at the St. Paul Hotel on January 8, 1951. *Ed.*

Speak behind it—"I happen to know," she whispered spitefully, "that she's not a day over ninety-nine."

I hope that we can keep this discussion above that level. I shan't challenge your claim to venerability if you won't challenge mine. So let us have no loose talk here about the dubious early years of the University of Minnesota, when the only students were of the preparatory school age and level of educability. I bring up the subject myself just to clear the atmosphere so that we may fully understand one another. I bind myself to say not a word about the absurd rumor (which I know to be utterly false) that the Minnesota Historical Society really got started when a customer in "Pig's Eye" Parrant's saloon turned to the stranger at his side and said: "I'll buy you a drink if you'll vote for me for president of the Historical Society, which I founded just thirteen seconds ago."

I have not meant to be frivolous about the adventure of growing old. Anyone who has lived for a half century and more in the same place must have the impression of having followed the touching continuity of a homely pageant, at once significant in its implications and intimate in its details. I take pleasure in the latter, and pride in the former, when I think of the changes that I have witnessed in the progress of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Long ago, when I was young, I had a very valuable relative who committed her destiny, briefly it must be admitted, to the historical society. To see her at her work I had to grope my way through the mazes of the basement floor of the Capitol, and there she was at a desk in the corridor—a devoted, but inconspicuous servant of the past, as was the society itself in those days.

Much later I found myself plunged into the kind of work, as writer, with which only the historical society could help me. And when I returned to its door I found that the beautiful serene dignity of its present building had been provided. There it stood on its commanding eminence, well placed side by side with the Capitol, past and present supporting one another like equals and partners. It was such a little way from the basement corridor of the Capitol to the present site, but in covering it the historical society seemed to me to have reached fulfillment and to have received from the people exactly its due.

I hope that, in such a day of appalling doubt as ours, it will not sound sentimental to suggest that if the society represents the past and the Capitol, the present, the university may be said through its students to represent the future. And if we are to have a future, we may continue to think with gratitude of the fact that there always have been intimate and rewarding relationships among our institutions. I should like to

bring together today a group of portraits of men whose careers in the service of the Minnesota Historical Society and of the University of Minnesota dramatize the bond existing between these two institutions. You know, of course, of whom I must speak first of all—William Watts Folwell. He was important to the university as the first of its presidents; he was important to the society in many ways—as its long-time vice-president and, toward the end of his life, its president. But the solid monument to his memory is his *History of Minnesota*, which the society, as publisher, gave itself the distinguished honor of presenting to our community.

One of the many things for which I have always been grateful to the Minnesota Historical Society is the fact that it provides so comfortable a bridge over which one may pass from *now* to *then*. If one takes this journey by the easy means of transportation provided by the study of letters and documents, one is likely to find that the past is not formidable, forbidding, and forlorn. The dead do not have their mouths stopped with dust. Indeed it begins to seem like an insensitive rudeness to suggest that they are dead at all. Folwell isn't dead for me. How could he be?—that blunt, direct, quizzical, curious man, who said so exactly what he believed, and said it without compromise and yet without rancor.

As president of the university he expressed ideas—at the rate of no fewer than three or four a day—with many of which we are just beginning to catch up. What he called the “genuine university” he and the men of vision like him were able, in their day, to create only on paper; yet the design they fashioned so long ago is the design that the most advanced of contemporary educators wish now to follow.

One might have supposed that service to a university, particularly in a period when it had to be created out of little besides an idea, would have exhausted any man's vitality. The university took Folwell when he was a young man, used him for fifteen years during a period when every day was marked by its own fight for survival, excused him as president when it found that it simply could not digest any more of his ideas, employed him for twenty years more as professor of political science and, during part of that time, as librarian, and then bowed him into retirement when he was seventy years old.

But to Folwell retirement meant merely doing something else. And that was how he came into the service of the society. For he conceived it to be his duty—that man of almost unexampled energy—to embark upon an entirely new career. For a quarter of a century and more he worked at turning over all the documents having to do with the devel-

opment of this state, and produced his four-volume history, a monument to the spirit of objective scholarship.

One thing among many that is admirable about the history is the evidence that it offers of an intelligence as incapable of subservience as it was of rancor. Folwell slurred over no moral shabbiness in recounting the history of men and of institutions in Minnesota, but he withheld admiration from no honest effort. Though he had been personally concerned in not a few of the enterprises he analyzed, and though he might easily have considered that some of the figures in the drama had misused him personally, no confusing mist of hostility seeps through these pages. It was not merely that he regarded those old associates with the determination to do them justice; more than that he brought to the examination of their characters the generous mind and the perceiving eye. The act of appraisal, as he practiced it, was one that demanded the greatest fastidiousness of discrimination. One could not betray its rules without loss of values that only a fool would willingly throw away. This was perhaps what made him a significant figure in the tradition of Minnesota—his view of society was broad; his intuitions were sharp; his sympathies were deep. Even on the printed page, communication from Folwell about any aspect of the human condition satisfies one's desire to see justice done coolly and at the same time to feel that hope has been nourished solicitously.

To have shared such a man means that the society and the university have roots in the same soil of intellectual energy. Before he was thirty Folwell studied Latin, Greek, mathematics, law, the violin; he traveled in Germany, making an intensive study of philology, picking up Sanskrit and Arabic along the way; he served in the Civil War as an officer of army engineers, building bridges; during his forties and fifties he created and taught many courses in a new field of instruction while he tried to call the "genuine university" into being; and finally after seventy had an exacting new career in a time when most men are content to listen to the whisperings of self-love, recounting the triumphs of the past. Not Folwell. For as Cyrus Northrop once said of him, experiencing the while a dizzy sensation mixed of impatient admiration and envious despair, "He was interested in everything from Plato to hog cholera."

As we all know well, those who were associated with him at the university and those who knew him at the society, he was a man whom it was always impossible not to admire and whom it was finally impossible not to love. The impeccable dignity of his self-respect, the scrupulous honesty of his devotion to learning, and the beguiling candor of his affections woo our minds as well as our hearts and make us forever grate-

ful to have shared a warm corner of the world with so excellent a man.

His eccentricities, as he grew older, offered entertaining footnotes to his exuberance of temper. He insisted that his editorial assistant, climbing the library steps with him, walk sideways because that was the manner in which nature's simple creatures, the cows, conserved their strength. He never thought of himself as old, and in his nineties had the habit of referring to a man many years his junior with humorous impatience as "that stubborn old man."

Affection for him grew greater every year until veneration was inevitably added with longevity. He was "Uncle Billy" to many generations of students and colleagues. Every day, almost to the end of his life, he moved vigorously across the university campus—a slight, staunch figure, pursuing his lifelong love affair with learning to the end. For all his friends, he became the embodiment of the good life. This meant to live for ideas, taking strength from their strength and giving back that gift in steadfast devotion to their interest.

At exactly the age that the poet, Edgar Lee Masters, gave to his figure in the *Spoon River Anthology*, Lucinda Matlock, Folwell died. Masters might have been speaking in Folwell's name when he said:

At ninety-six I had lived long enough, that is all
And passed to a sweet repose.

Perhaps the rest of Lucinda Matlock's lines might also be claimed for Folwell, though they have more of reproach in them than he ever permitted himself:

What is this I hear of sorrow and weariness,
Anger, discontent and drooping hopes?
Degenerate sons and daughters,
Life is too strong for you —
It takes life to love life.

Folwell possessed the gift of life to an extent and in a degree of security that has been given to few men to know. If your institution and mine are in robust health today, it is at least partly because they drew early upon his virtually inexhaustible store of vitality.

Another conspicuous figure whose ideas and purposes it has been our good fortune to share is Guy Stanton Ford. Perhaps we may permit ourselves to suggest in the privacy of this room, where every word is spoken, of course, in the strictest confidence, that an interest in history tends to have a civilizing effect on the human mind. Certainly the mind of Guy Stanton Ford is one of the most completely mature, sensitive, and alert that our community has known in recent years. The fact that one of Dr. Ford's chief concerns has ever been the interpretation of human destiny

in terms of history has been of incalculable benefit to both the society and the university.

I think of Mr. Ford as being one of the most adept fishers of men whose subtle skills it has been Minnesota's happy experience to watch. Indeed in his own particular way he has been an angler so "compleat" that his performances have established new standards for the art. In defiance of his colleagues, the psychologists, Mr. Ford seemed to invent his own instincts. One of them was for knowing in what dark pools of the academic world men with ideas were lurking. He sought them out wherever they were and let down the bait that might capture them for transportation to Minnesota.

From the moment of his arrival as dean of the University of Minnesota graduate school, Mr. Ford was deep in the confidence of the creative men and women of our community. In his determination to build up a distinguished graduate faculty he brought good men to all departments of the university, but he did not fail to give his own department the special benefit of his talents. Into the history faculty he brought such men as Clarence Alvord, Lester Shippee, August Krey, and Solon Justus Buck, each of whom was at one time or another to serve the historical society as a member of its executive council.

Mr. Ford himself joined the council almost as soon as he had taken his first meal in his Minnesota home and unlocked the door of his office. It was, as the society came very soon to realize, a moment of tremendous decision in its history. Mr. Ford had not the slightest intention of allowing the society to remain in its gentle antiquarian slumber in the basement of the Capitol. As one of his admirers has written: "He was primarily responsible for the transformation of the Minnesota Historical Society . . . [into] an active agency for the promotion of research, the development of interest and the dissemination of information in the field of state and regional history."

Mr. Ford once coined a word of which he was fond and which he used, not infrequently, to express his distaste for any kind of inadequacy. "Monohippie," which being translated means one-horse, was not meant to give offense to enterprises which in their essential design were intended to be small. Rather it was intended to rebuke those who had allowed efforts of potential power to fail in the realization of their possibilities. Wherever Mr. Ford moved, the big sleep of intellectual inertia ended. On the campus of the university, where before his time as dean of the graduate school there had been little in the way of research except in the realm of agriculture, projects suddenly bloomed and multiplied so that this new fertility altered the entire look of the scene.

Mr. Ford had been warned by his colleague in history, Wallace Note-stein, that the university library was far from being satisfactory. He got that changed by the simple device of refusing to come to Minnesota until he had been assured possession of a regular, special appropriation for books needed to bring the library up to the "desired efficiency."

Similarly, the society profited by his energy. The building of the present home may not be credited to him, in a reckless access of gratitude. The legislature, always well disposed toward the society, had appropriated funds in 1913, even before Mr. Ford made his debut as remodeler of our institutions. But the project was brought to completion and the doors opened in 1918, during the period when Mr. Ford was always somewhere about saying in effect, "Let's get on with it."

And certainly we need have no hesitancy in crediting to him the new design for the society's enterprise. Out of the university's classrooms and seminars went one after another highly trained expert to conduct in the best tradition of scholarship the interests of the reconstructed, "multi-hippie" institution.

The finest of his gifts to the society was, of course, the presentation of Dr. Buck as superintendent. No one whose parents had been superbly inspired to give him the names in baptism of Solon and Justus could have had the gross ingratitude, the shabby effrontery, to be less than a distinguished person. But Mr. Buck has improved upon their challenge by becoming very nearly a unique person. Since he left us he has held many important posts, including that of archivist of the United States and now that of head of the manuscript division of the Library of Congress. The Minnesota Historical Society long has had the benefit of the kind of guidance that finds its way at last to the highest posts in the gift of our democracy.

In 1914 it became necessary for the university to replace Frank Maloy Anderson of the history department, who had decided to take his talents east to Dartmouth. This transplantation did nothing to diminish Professor Anderson's good Midwestern vitality. He has survived many years of retirement to bring to completion only a year ago one of the scholarly achievements of his lifetime—the discovery of the identity of an important Civil War writer of anonymous footnotes to history. In offering tribute, by the way, to Professor Anderson, let us comfort ourselves once more with the thought that a concern with history seems to confer upon a worthy follower the privileges of longevity, as well as of civilized maturity of mind. Needing an American historian of distinction equal to that of Professor Anderson, Ford caught up Solon Justus Buck, whose study of the Granger movement had made him, even as a very young

man, an important figure among his colleagues, particularly among those of the Midwest.

Within a year of his arrival in Minnesota, Mr. Buck had been persuaded to assume the post of superintendent of the society, keeping his association with the university through the one class that he continued to teach. The link between the society and the university was drawn closer than ever, with Dean Ford and Mr. Buck conspiring comfortably together to devise new ways of making Minnesota aware that it possessed a repository for the records of its past. Equally important was their provision of means for the interpretation of the past by those who had been close to it as venerable survivors in the pioneer period or as descendants of such survivors. So in that period of energy, imagination, and insight, techniques were invented to popularize the work of the society—the tours, the public meetings, the lectures, and the publications. The debut of the *Minnesota History Bulletin* came in that day. We know it today under its more informal name, *Minnesota History*, but the approach to its material was as vigorous then as now. The editors split the difference between drama and scholarship with the same deft stroke that has made the publication readable from its first issue. Professor Buck was intimately and personally concerned with the task of getting Minnesota's story told. During his residence here he gave every evidence of being comfortably at home, taking a wife from among us and persuading her to become his collaborator on a volume of *Stories of Early Minnesota*. And once more the family atmosphere in which the society and the university have grown up together is pleasantly revealed. For Elizabeth Hawthorne, before she became Mrs. Buck, had been a teacher in the English department of the university. It would be almost as impossible, and it would be undesirable, to dissolve our union.

So in the teens of the century the operation of the historical society achieved a high professional level. The collections both of books and of private papers grew in size and in distinction. I suspect that one of the most important achievements of the period was that of waking the consciousness of the community—no, let me put it more emphatically, waking the conscience of the community—to the fact that few acts of vandalism are more shamelessly immoral than that of taking grandpa's letters and account books out into the backyard and burning them. If Minnesota numbers among its citizens comparatively few humble suburban Hitlers, malevolently occupied in destroying the past, it is because Dean Ford and Professor Buck long ago educated our community out of all inclination to indulge in such pagan sacrifices.

They had, of course, a valuable ally in a man whose importance both

to the society and the university has increased steadily during his strenuous career as student, teacher, writer, scholar. This, I realize, is an inappropriately casual way in which to introduce a phenomenon of our time, one having all the more pleasant aspects of a human being, but, nonetheless, resembling much more closely a great force of nature. I could, as you have guessed, refer only to Theodore C. Blegen.

No one, I think, has ever quite dared to contemplate, much less attempted to explain, the kind of vitality that makes a man able to hold down two or three posts simultaneously, sit on a dozen committees, produce two or three books a year, and still manage to seem like one of the most benign and ameliorative influences in all man's intellectual and moral climate. As you know, Mr. Blegen has made an offhand day's work of such matters from the moment when he became assistant superintendent of the society in 1922 to the present moment of his leadership as dean of the graduate school at the university.

There could be no better embodiment of the interests which our two institutions share. Dean Blegen's concern with the story of Minnesota as a place in which human beings may live together peacefully and profitably has been, at times, as intimate as an account of one young girl's adjustment to a new community, and at others as broad as the tremendous epic of the Norwegian migration. His own scholarship justifies the principle on which he has based his conduct of the affairs of graduate education. He believes that, without sacrificing depth, it is possible greatly to broaden the view of human society that the trained eye can receive. And so we have had from him essays on historical themes that rival in literary charm any belonging to the great tradition, and we have had also monumental studies that enclose and dramatize a significant movement in modern history.

It is interesting to examine the parallels in the careers of these men who have made contributions so absolutely vital to the health of the society and of the university. Folwell was a president first and a historian afterward; Ford was historian first and president afterward; Buck and Blegen have been historians and administrators simultaneously; all have been creative men possessed of enough vitality to nourish two or three separate careers.

I do not know quite what virtues to claim for the intellectual climate of Minnesota that these men have found it so bracing. In making the suggestion that there is some specialness to our situation I remind myself of one of the obsessions of the pioneers. They persuaded themselves to believe that there was some magic in the weather itself. The *St. Anthony Express*, in an editorial on the prospects of the infant University of Min-

nesota, once permitted itself to say: "God evidently intended Minnesota as the masterpiece of all his works, the axle on which the Union should turn, the sun of our Federal system between which and New England there could be no more comparison than between Hyperion and a satyr." The *Express*, in a later investigation of the "Influence of the Climate and Scenery of Minnesota on the Mind," offered the modest suggestion that our obvious superiority must be attributed to the fact that "the lassitude so common in other climates is unknown among us."

I shall avoid the temptation to put a latter day footnote to these discussions by saying simply that, to whatever our good fortune may be attributed, we have had in the society and at the university an excellent fellowship of men, each of whom has made a place in the mind of the executive for the scholar while at the same time insisting that the scholar must never forget to be also a man of letters.

It is good to realize that even when we must go outside the university to find a director for the society, we know what we want. In Harold Dean Cater we have, as we have always had before, the triple talent man — administrator, scholar, commander of a subtle, graceful style.

And it is good to realize, too, that the reciprocity in the realm of our intellectual interests which has always characterized the relations of the society and the university is practiced more vigorously today than ever before. We share in more projects, collaborate over a wider area of investigation, pool our resources of men and materials with understanding more complete. Once more our president at the university serves on your executive council; one of the finest of our hardy perennials, Professor August Krey, blooms picturesquely among your leaders; and there are others who contribute new buoyance to the tradition of co-operation which we both have treasured as our greatest pride. The *Gopher Historian* adds the names of two more university men, Horace Morse and George McCune, to the list of those who work vigorously and well in our two worlds. And there is, of course, a constant flow of students from our campus to consult the many departments in which your collections are unique — the manuscripts, the local newspapers, the Scandinavian language newspapers, the county histories, the religious histories. My friends at the university library tell me that they have no more welcome clients than those the society sends them to consult, among other things, the university's collections in Midwest and Scandinavian history.

I am about to bring down the curtain on this tableau of mutual good will, and I do not wish to do so in a mood that might be considered inappropriately slack. Let me instead revert to my role as grateful juvenile by reminding you of two dramatic moments in which the so-

ciety has given bounty to the university. Long ago, when we were very young and our library consisted of little besides the volumes of one encyclopedia huddled together against the chill of an arctic wasteland of empty shelves, the historical society made us a present of seventy-four books—the first such gift that we had ever received. And only the other day the historical society, looking at one of the collections of which it has chief reason to be proud, saw that some of its Folwell material referred specifically to the university and to Folwell's intimate interest in its affairs. So, graciously, generously, this material was separated from the rest and sent as a gift of friendship to the archives at the university. And verily I say unto you, greater love hath no librarian than this—that he will split a collection for a friend.



Only a few months after Dr. Folwell arrived in Minnesota to assume the presidency of its infant university, he marked his thirty-seventh birthday. On that day, February 14, 1870, he wrote as follows to his mother:

“After a good many shifts and turns I am at length engaged in a work which is on the whole to my mind. So far as I am able to judge, I am giving satisfaction and am getting a good footing here. My ‘inaugural’ took well all around. . . . We are very comfortable this winter. I am paying \$300 rent, which I don’t mean to do many years. If I can borrow \$2000 I will build a house. My rent will pay for it by and by. . . . We like Minnesota, its climate and the people we meet. 22° below is the coldest mark we have reached, and that only one morning. . . . I hope you will not think of us as out of the world. We are in the exact *middle* of the world. If you could see what fine young cities these two are you wouldn’t feel sorry for us at all.”

Here are a few pertinent passages from Dr. Folwell’s inaugural:

“Though we build for the future, we plan from the past.”

“Looking forward to the future, amid scenes as yet unused to academic displays, we celebrate and emphasize, with song and praise and benediction, — *beginnings*. Ours is the hopeful toil of the sower, not the consummate fruition of the harvest.”

“Minnesota will become a great and rich commonwealth. Her rare, bracing, solubrious, but not too genial climate is bringing here a population of men who expect to work for their living. Shut up in-doors during the long, though not dreary winters, in workshops and around firesides, our people must by and by become thoughtful, serious, studious, inventive.”

“We found the American University, with a double purpose; the increase of material wealth and comfort, and the culture and satisfaction of the spirit.”



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