

DEAN BLEGEN of the graduate school in the University of Minnesota was superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society from 1931 to 1939. Before its annual meeting on May 11, 1954, he read this memorial sketch of his long-time friend and associate, Judge Brill.

A WORKER *in the* HOUSE of HISTORY

THEODORE C. BLEGEN

NO SMALL PART of the achievement and glory of the Minnesota Historical Society through all the years since it began in 1849 has rested upon the integrity and selfless interest of public-spirited men and women — people who somehow have lent strength and vigor and vision and encouragement to the administration of its affairs.

The long roll of such good workers in the House of History is one of honor and of exemplary service; and in that roll the name of Kenneth G. Brill occupies a place of distinction. We remember Judge Brill as a life member of this society for a quarter of a century, as a member of our council for eighteen years, as vice-president and then president through six years of change and crisis from 1942 to 1948, and as a devoted worker on countless committees that have wrestled with the permanent and with the passing problems of the society. We remember, too, his distinguished legal career as an assistant city attorney in St. Paul, as a practising lawyer, and as a conscientious judge of the District Court for a period of twenty-five years. These, and his many posts of high honor, including the presidency of the Ramsey County Bar Association, his service as a trustee of Hamline University, and his activities as president of the Minnesota

Society of the Sons of the American Revolution, naturally come to mind as we do honor to his memory. They help to account for the inevitable choice of this citizen of citizens as one of the hundred most distinguished living Minnesotans in the centennial year of 1949.

In perspective, however, these honors and positions seem only the setting — only the official framework — for the quiet impact of a finely sensitive mind and a warmly human and lovable character. Kenneth Brill was not an office or a title. The man and not his position is memorable and cherished. Honors he brushed aside with characteristic self-deprecation. Positions of high responsibility he accepted with dedication, but also with a faint air of surprise at the confidence others placed in his character and ability. His sense both of humor and of balance never deserted him, and often his wisest counsel, on which many of us leaned, followed an anecdote or humorous tale drawn from rich experience and shrewd observation, flavored with a whiff from his pipe.

So quiet and unassuming were the judge's ways that some people did not quite grasp the fact that this man's energy and imagination were written firmly and enduringly into the ongoing life of the society. In all the

turbulence of crises and changing administrations, he never lost sight of fundamentals. The manuscript division, unique and priceless for the history of our people, was to him the heart of the society, and no fewer than twenty-four collections of manuscripts were secured directly through him, probably many more indirectly. His imagination pictured the potentialities in the building of a collection of the records of American lumbering and the forest products industry, and he took the lead in the founding of our Forest Products History Foundation and also in interesting one of the outstanding leaders of that industry to plan a majestic gift of funds for the support of the work. Similarly, he helped to envision a project for the history of the public health movement in this state, and he aided in securing adequate funds with which to finance it.

As soon as Judge Brill became president of the society in January, 1945, he devised a wide-reaching plan for committees on publications, historic sites, publicity, membership, and other matters. His ideas were accepted by the council and put into effect. He saw in the centennial of Minnesota Territory an unfolding panorama of history from 1849 to 1949, and he was a responsible leader in planning an appropriate celebration, always with a clear eye to permanent values for our society and our state history, and not to evanescent display. His presidency was a very critical period, with several quick changes in the directorship, and Judge Brill took upon himself a vast amount of work, not unmingled with cares and anxieties, but he never faltered in his course.

When Judge Brill reached the end of his presidency, Professor August C. Krey of the University of Minnesota paid him a beautiful tribute on behalf of the entire society. Dr. Krey recalled the discouragements and concerns of the period, and then added that Judge Brill's "gracious courtesy, his wide sympathy and understanding, his fairness and his faith in his fellow men, though they must have been sorely tried at times, remained unimpaired." I like to recall that

tribute not only for its discernment, but also because the appraisal was made at the time, when Kenneth Brill himself could hear it. The praise of this good and faithful man did not have to wait until this day and this occasion after his death. It was said, and well said, at the time, to the accompaniment of a quizzically humorous, but I think not wholly unpleased, acceptance by the judge himself.

It will surprise no one to know that Judge Brill was an indefatigable reader of biography and history. He had many other interests, too, some of which are not so well known. He was once a football player, a star runner of the half mile and mile, and an oarsman. In his later years he was a faithful reader and student of the exploits of the great detective, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, and he attended the meetings of that quaint society known as the Baker Street Irregulars. He was a systematic collector of many kinds of items, and not many months before he died he turned over to me an essay he had written on the Sherlock Holmes theme in advertising, with countless clippings he had made through many years from newspapers and magazines. Knowing of my curious interest in crime and detection, he also let me read, from time to time, complete transcripts of fascinating murder trials over which he had presided—and presided, as I discovered, with solid acumen and unflinching fairness. Nor will it surprise anyone to know that, alongside his inexhaustible fund of anecdotes, he had a very witty tongue that could mock the pretentious and expose the meretricious. Coupled with his wisdom, his wit made him a charming companion at dinner table or around a fireside, smoke curling from his pipe and tales from his memory.

So I recall a leader of the Minnesota Historical Society, whose integrity and wisdom, whose genius for friendship, whose cheerful readiness to bulwark a good cause have made him a remembered part of that very history which, with no thought of himself, he did his creative best to preserve and promote.



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