A Century of Manuscript Collecting

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DEAN BLEGEN of the University of Minnesota graduate school wrote the following essay for use as a "Foreword" to the society's recently published Guide number 2 to its manuscript collections. A reprint is placed before readers of this magazine instead of a review of the work. As assistant superintendent and superintendent, Dr. Blegen was connected with the society from 1922 to 1939. His overall picture of its manuscript resources is thus based on firsthand knowledge.

TWO DECADES AGO the wealth of personal papers accumulated by the Minnesota Historical Society over the preceding eight decades was described and indexed in a Guide to 455 collections. Now a supplement serenely resumes the story—or catalogue—where the other leaves off, continuing with number 456. The newly published Guide number 2 accounts for the enrichment of the society's collections during the past twenty years, plus certain sources descriptions of which were omitted from the earlier volume.1 In years to come other volumes in the series, one may safely predict, will carry the numbering on from 1645—the final figure in this volume—into many thousands.

This continuity of numbering symbolizes the endless and challenging task of the society. It was fortunate indeed that this institution began in the very year the Territory of Minnesota was organized and has been active in every decade since that pioneer age. With a vigilant eye on the past, the society is also in touch with each new year of event and change. Its collecting, consistently with the purposes of the founding fathers, therefore takes into account Minnesota's long backgrounds as well as its contemporary life.

A reading of the present Guide quickly discloses the fact that recent years not only have added an impressive number of new collections but also have enriched and enlarged many of the collections described in the earlier volume. It is noteworthy also that the new Guide has a much broader scope than the earlier one, since it includes not only personal papers but also the records of diverse organizations, business establishments, institutions, and groups.

The user will find it desirable and convenient to have both volumes at hand for guidance in his search through the vast storehouse of manuscripts now preserved by the society. Often one collection supplements another, and the research trail on a given question or person may wind through a score or more of collections.

Twenty years ago, in introducing the first volume, I sketched the history of the so-
ciety’s manuscripts department and drew attention both to the scope and the character of the collection as a whole and to its potential usefulness, not alone to historians but to many other interpreters of the past as well. I took note also of the importance of scientific administration of manuscript collections and the national need for analytical inventories as “a step toward the organization of knowledge in America on a scale not yet achieved and in a spirit conforming to the new day of planning and co-operation.” Much of what I then wrote seems pertinent and applicable to the present volume. The earlier *Guide*, it is fair to say, was a pioneering venture that helped to forward throughout the country a movement to make the historical treasures of the American past more readily available, through systematic descriptions and inventories, than had been the case in an earlier day.

A review of the contents of the present *Guide* leaves several very distinct impressions with respect to the character of the collection as a whole. One is that of the variety of historical materials assembled by the society. Listed in these pages are autobiographies, letters, diaries, reminiscences, biographies, minutes of organizations, business account books, case records, bills of lading, constitutions, ledgers, legal papers, cartoons, genealogies, inventories, household accounts, records of births and marriages and deaths, even autographs, and yet other kinds of sources. This variety suggests at once the comprehensive sweep of historical interest that the society has had in its planned efforts to find and preserve the documents of Minnesota’s life and people, and some of the manifold ways in which a civilized society manages to record its doings.

The impression of variety is strengthened when one looks at the physical nature of the collection and notes that in addition to original, firsthand manuscripts and typewritten and carbon copies of letters, there is a growing body of material preserved in the form of photostats and microfilms. Thus important records for the history of the state and the region, the originals of which are preserved in London or Montreal or New York or other far places, have been made available through modern technical devices. Illustrations include the Jonathan Carver Papers, archives in the United States Office of Indian Affairs, the records of the American Home Missionary Society, the London Papers of the Hudson’s Bay Company, and the Joseph N. Nicollet and Jay Cooke papers.

But the scope of the collection is most vividly illustrated by its content — its far-ranging subject matter. One expects to find clues to records that reflect the industrial and economic past of Minnesota. The building of the commonwealth was a big job, with many facets, involving the most diverse talents and skills. Here are descriptions of papers relating to the early fur trade, to lumbering and farming, to steamboating, real estate, surveying, mining, roads and railroads, to dairying, horticulture, forestry, architecture, banking, housing, advertising, and prices and wages, even to soapmaking and lacemaking.

Students these days are much concerned with social and cultural history. They can use the new *Guide* as a key to records of education, church (including many denominations) and religion, foreign and home missions, journalism, travel, household economy, social relations, music, opera, the story of professional and learned societies, the temperance movement and liquor laws, saloonkeeping also, and various aspects of creative work, including writing and the arts. And, inevitably, the manuscripts illuminate the broad spheres of political history, Indian policy, wars from Lincoln’s day to our own, lawmaking, the judiciary, labor problems, and a host of other important matters.

The sweep of subject interest is not unrelated to the chronological coverage of the collection, which extends from the middle of the seventeenth century to the edge of the
The story behind the collections runs from the days of the native red men and early French explorers down to contemporary times. The greatest concentration seems to be in the fascinating quarter century after 1850, but the collections for the period from 1875 to 1900 and the two succeeding quarter centuries are also numerous - and in the longer perspective of future years these periods may well rival and surpass in interest the pioneering years of the 1850s and 1860s.

A distinctive mark of the total collection is its reflection of the activities and achievements of people in every walk of life, including not only famous leaders but also humble workers on farms and in towns. It is hazardous for a historian to single out particular collections as of special and outstanding importance. In a large picture of a period or a subject, materials that do not focus upon persons of prominence often turn out to be significant and even essential. Both common and uncommon men have built Minnesota. One cannot fail to take cognizance in this new Guide, however, of the papers of eminent Minnesotans such as Christopher C. Andrews, the pioneer of forest conservation; of significant political figures such as Cushman K. Davis, Frank B. Kellogg, John Lind, Floyd B. Olson, Andrew J. Volstead, and Adolph O. Eberhart; and of influential men in a variety of professions, such as James Gray, journalist and mayor; Lynn Haines, political editor; James Manahan, lawyer and politician; David C. Shepard, railroad contractor; Jason C. Easton, banker; Solomon G. Comstock, state legislator, Congressman, and university regent; Engebret H. Hobe, for many years a consul of Norway and businessman in this area; and Emil Oberhoffer, the dynamic director of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra in its early years. Of interest is the preservation by the society of the papers of scholars and teachers associated with the University of Minnesota. These include Professors Frederic K. Butters (botany), Clarence H. Eckles (dairying), Gisle Bothne (Scandinavian literature), Oscar W. Firkins (drama and criticism), Theophilus Haecker (animal husbandry), Alfred Owre (dentistry), Thomas S. Roberts (ornithology), and Matilda J. C. Wilkin (German). And it is pleasant to note that some of the leaders of the Minnesota Historical Society itself are represented, including Dr. Solon J. Buck, superintendent for many years and one of the creative architects of the manuscripts collection, and the late Judge Kenneth G. Brill, onetime president of the society. Interest in the society not infrequently is passed on from father to son, and it is gratifying to know that a daybook kept by Judge Brill's father in 1875 is also listed in the present Guide.

A table of names and collections may seem unexciting to some, but the Guide opens the way to hundreds of productive investigations that will throw new light upon the building of Minnesota. Its potentialities therefore are almost limitless, and its lists, thus scanned and interpreted, have a genuinely dramatic interest. A thousand and one histories, biographies, monographs, articles, novels, feature stories, plays, radio and television presentations, and "documentaries" are waiting to be written from these papers.

The directed trend toward a more adequate representation of the business and organizational activities of the people of Minnesota, as reflected in many of the newer collections, signifies that the society has broadened its collecting policy to meet the responsibility of a wide coverage of the state's history. Here again a perusal of the newly issued Guide reveals an astonishing diversity of records. There are lumber, mercantile, and banking papers, and various other business archives, though the collection is weak in the records of certain major industrial concerns, such the great milling companies. Many churches and religious organizations have placed their older papers with the society, including the Minnesota diocese of the Protestant Episcopal church. Lodges, such as the Odd Fellows,
Good Templars, and Elks, are represented.

Americans are famed for their organizational talent and zeal, and it is not surprising that in this Midwestern collection one can find the papers of immigration companies, meat cutters and butcher workmen, bachelors' clubs and babies' homes, better business bureaus, cigar makers' unions, the D.A.R., transportation companies, pioneer inns, study and literary clubs, missionary societies, cemetery associations, orphan asylums, Grangers, Swedish and other immigrant groups, claim associations, regi­mental clubs, creamery associations, Turnvereins, political parties, fish companies, library associations, musical clubs, a state dental association, cyclone relief committees, phrenological societies, and even the Robert E. Lee chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. These and many other groups have played parts in the ongoing social, institutional, and economic life of the state. Each must be appraised in its setting of time and place and circumstance. All, taken together, throw light on the American propensity for "joining" and on the Minnesota and American web of life and community experience that this "joining" has helped to spin from pioneer days to the present.

Minnesota has been a part of a region, of a nation, and of a world, and the collection is by no means confined in its historical interest to the geographic boundaries of the state. Minnesota's interrelations with wider areas are reflected in the national and international origins of the manuscripts themselves and by the many bridges they set up between Minnesota and the larger world outside the state. A policy of "splendid isolation" would be as absurd in the manuscript collecting of a state as in the political and international relations of a people. This collection properly and necessarily is focused upon Minnesota, but inevitably it crosses boundaries — into Canada, over the Atlantic to the European world, to other parts of the globe from which our people have come or to which they have gone, and into many, if not most, of the states of the Union. Thus the collection is of international and national as well as statewide interest.

I cannot close this commentary without paying a meed of tribute to the Minnesota Historical Society. It enforces its position of leadership by offering to the public a carefully designed key to the rich materials it has collected. The key would have little meaning if it were not for the fundamental work the society has done in gathering up and preserving for the future a priceless collection of records. It has pioneered and developed, under expert management and imaginative leadership, a systematic and scientific administration of a manuscripts collection that has grown, not like Topsy, but as the result of considered collecting policy and strategy.

No one can fully appraise the ultimate value of such a collection. That value has already been illustrated in many scores of books and articles, but it will not be measurably disclosed until the harvest of historical studies based upon the manuscripts has been many times multiplied in future years. It may never be fully disclosed, but one can say with assurance that historical material of great interest and promise has been garnered, arranged, and made available to use. Much of this material would almost certainly have been lost forever if the Minnesota Historical Society had not been in existence and if it had not carried forward a vigorous program of action.

The treasures that have been collected — the recorded and indelible memory of the past — will increase, not lessen, in value and interest as time goes on. Their importance will grow the more as the collection is still further enriched with each passing year and decade. Founded more than a century ago, the society seems certain to continue to function as a vital collecting institution, alert to the importance of history to the people and dedicated to the enlightenment of our own generation and the people of the illimitable tomorrows.