THE Winona County Historical Society and its SPECIALIZED MUSEUMS

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DR. YOUNGER, a Winona physician, has served as president of the Winona County Historical Society since 1954, when it was reorganized. This is a condensed version of a talk, reviewing the organization's activities and accomplishments during four short years, which Dr. Younger presented in Winona on August 2-3 before an audience of about a hundred and forty people. Most of them were members of a tour of the Mississippi and Root River valleys — one of a dozen trips arranged during the summer of 1958 by the Minnesota Historical Society in co-operation with the Minnesota Statehood Centennial Commission.

Before assembling for the dinner at which Dr. Younger spoke, the tourists had traveled southward from the Twin Cities by bus to a point just below the Whitman Dam, where they boarded six river cruisers for the remainder of the trip to Winona; had landed at Levee Park, examined the “James P. Pearson,” and viewed the displays it houses; had visited both the Huff-Lamberton House at Winona and the Bunnell House at Homer; and had seen the impressive and attractive exhibits in the county society's Winona museum. Thus the visitors were well prepared for Dr. Younger's remarks about the local society's astounding progress and the holdings it has acquired in the four years of his presidency. The extracts here published should serve to inspire and stimulate all who are engaged in local historical activity.

IN OPENING, I want to thank the Minnesota Historical Society for the tremendous impetus its tours have given the Winona County Historical Society. The local organization had been dormant about four years in 1954, when the state society an-
nounced plans for a tour to Winona. In preparation for the visitors, a group of prominent and interested citizens met with a view to reactivating the local society. By the time the tourists arrived, a board of directors, composed both of old and new members, had been set up. All had a strong desire to do justice to the history of the richly endowed area in which we live.

With the coming of another Minnesota Historical Society tour this year, we of the Winona County society have again been stimulated to improve it and to make it worthy of our parent organization. The last two weeks especially have been marked by furious activity, as we cleaned our steamboat museum and the Bunnell House, and improved the exhibits and storage rooms in the Winona museum.

Very early in my association with county historical work, I was puzzled by the question, "What special sites and other things do we have in our community that should be saved for future generations?" One local landmark that was called to my attention as early as the summer of 1954 was the home built by Willard Bunnell at Homer in the 1850s. Since it was still very much in its original condition almost a century later, it seemed worth saving. I therefore approached two prominent Winona citizens, each of whom gave a thousand dollars toward the purchase price, and the county commissioners matched their donation with a gift of two thousand dollars. Mrs. Agnes Berrum, who owned the house, then reduced her original price of $4,500 to $4,000, and the house became ours.

All this was accomplished so easily that other leaders of the society and I were greatly heartened. Sometime later, the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution paid an architect well versed in restoration work to visit and inspect the Bunnell House. He reported that twenty-five thousand dollars would be needed to put it in condition for year-round use as a tourist attraction. Since we have not obtained that sum, or any part of it, the Winona County Historical Society is maintaining a holding operation until such time as funds are available to do the right kind of restoration job on the Bunnell House. We are, however, making necessary repairs and inspecting the building frequently. Thus, if we cannot complete the project, the next generation will have a chance to do so.
SINCE we decided to become a truly county-wide organization, we began to look for property in another corner of the area. We believed that some historical preservation work might be done at St. Charles, which celebrated its centennial in 1954. The society was invited to participate in the event by arranging a historical display at the Winona County Fair, which is held in that community. Although the managers gave us rather liberal space for this centennial feature, they made it clear that we could not expect such display facilities another year. One member of the fair board, Mr. Rudolph Kaehler of St. Charles, suggested, however, that we try to obtain for preservation one of the old schoolhouses that were fast disappearing from the neighborhood. We soon found just the school we wanted about five miles from St. Charles, and we were able to purchase it out of the society’s funds. We then sponsored a concert to raise money for repairs and for moving the school to the fairgrounds, where, we believed, it would be more accessible and better protected than on its original site.

After we had moved the building and constructed an excellent basement with good lighting and insulation beneath it, we decided to use it as a rural school museum, where representative objects from the 120 school districts in Winona County could be displayed. The school has been open during the county fair every year since 1954, and hundreds of people have visited it and viewed the museum which it houses. The collection is growing slowly, and research is progressing on the school’s former teachers, students, and board members. We are indeed sorry that this tour does not include a visit to St. Charles, and a stop at the schoolhouse museum, so that you could see all four of the major holdings of the Winona County society.

A one-room country schoolhouse at St. Charles now operated as a museum.
THE ORGANIZATION became interested in a third project in 1955, when the Laird Norton Company, a local lumber firm, celebrated its centennial. It marked the occasion by presenting the Winona County society with about thirty thousand dollars to be used in establishing and equipping a museum on the second floor of the handsome Lumberman’s Building at 125 West Fifth Street in Winona. The area now occupied by the society’s museum had never been finished, because it was not needed by any of the three lumber companies that had offices in the building. With the aid of the Minnesota Historical Society, which advised us how to proceed, we set up the museum that you visited this afternoon. It has now been open for more than two years, and hundreds of visitors are attracted every month by exhibits that are changed frequently to maintain interest. Because the museum was a centennial gift of a lumber company, we have stressed exhibits relating to the logging industry, which was of prime importance in the history of Winona. The museum also serves as the society’s home office, where valuable documents and records can be preserved in quarters that are fireproof and virtually as “safe as a bank.”

THE SOCIETY’s fourth and latest big accession is the steamboat “James P. Pearson.” In April, 1955, our board placed an advertisement in the Waterways Journal which read: “Wanted—Typical old steamboat for preservation.” To our amazement, we found that there were few in existence any more. We were told that if we had inquired a year earlier, we could have chosen from a number of very good boats. It seemed that very suddenly, about 1954, steamboats just vanished from the upper Mississippi.

Someone saw our advertisement and sent us an unsigned card suggesting that we write the Consumers Company of Moline, Illinois. We did so, and found that the firm had a steamer, the “James P. Pearson,” which was standing idle and was about to be dismantled. A group of Winonans went to Moline to inspect the “Pearson.” With them was Thomas H. Swain, newly appointed director of the Minnesota Statehood Centennial Commission. I had interested him in the project, hoping that through the commission, the boat could be purchased and refurbished for use on the river in 1958.

Although the commission did not help us obtain the “Pearson,” our interest did not wane, and finally such a generous offer was made by its owners that we decided we could purchase it. Sufficient funds were obtained from local merchants to make a substantial down payment, and a generous gift of fifteen hundred dollars from a prominent citizen of Winona financed the operation of pulling it out of the river and up to its present location in Levee Park. At this point, we were both financially exhausted and in possession of a vulnerable object, subject to all the hazards that are inevitable when proper safeguards are not provided.

It was in July, 1957, after we had failed to find sponsorship for the “Pearson,” that I wrote to Mr. Leighton Wilkie of Santa Barbara, California, to ask if he might be interested in providing support for the project. Mr. Wilkie is a son of Julius C. Wilkie, who went to Winona in the 1890s as a railroad machinist. During World War I, he opened Wilkie’s Garage and Machine Works at 208 West Third Street, where he did automobile repairing and other machine work. He operated this business until sometime after 1925, when he moved to Minneapolis. His three sons—Leighton, Robert, and James—continued in the machine business and organized the DoAll Company, which manufactures modern machine tools, gauges, and other industrial products. The company’s success led the brothers to set up the Wilkie Foundation, which has financed many fascinating research efforts.

After much correspondence and many telephone calls, the Winona County society received a promise that the Wilkie Foundation would underwrite the “Pearson” proj-
ect. Mr. Wilkie wrote: “We have pleasant recollections of the old steamboating days, for we spent many happy times aboard the steamers, moonlight excursions, and daytime trips, etc. The music of the calliope which could be heard all over the town heralded these excursions which were memorable occasions of our boyhood.”

Mr. Wilkie suggested that we try to locate a calliope and indicated that, if we found one, he would help us acquire it as an added attraction for the “Pearson.” I am happy to say that we did obtain an original old Tangleley calliope, completely restored, have mounted it on a float modeled after the “Pearson,” and have used it to help celebrate the Minnesota centennial. At the end of 1958, the calliope will be installed on the “Pearson,” and our float model of the boat will probably be mounted beside the new superhighway south of Winona to attract tourists to Levee Park.

With the initial gift of five thousand dollars from the Wilkie Foundation, work on the “Pearson” progressed steadily through consultations with rivermen, architects, and contractors. It was decided that the most practical foundation for the boat was a layer of gravel and stones a foot thick. A heavy coat of creosote was put on the bottom of the vessel, and it was sandblasted, spray painted, and generally repaired. In August, 1957, on a visit to Winona, Mr. Wilkie suggested that a cabin be built on the second deck to make the “Pearson” more nearly resemble a small packet. He felt that the cabin could serve as a museum and as a place for meetings. He provided an additional $5,000 to implement this work and donated $2,275 to purchase the calliope.

After a study of pictures of old steamboats and conferences with the Dubuque Boat and Boiler Works, a hundred-year-old Iowa firm, we remodeled the boat as Mr. Wilkie had suggested.

Incidentally, it just happened that the

AN exhibit in the Winona society’s museum depicts a kitchen of the 1880s

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building of a new highway entailed tearing down about seven hundred feet of steel fence at the King estate near Homer. The Winona society was fortunate enough to obtain this, using about half of it to enclose the “Pearson” and the remainder to fence the Bunnell House. Since the fence was erected, our worries over vandalism have diminished. People seem to respect the properties now that they are properly protected. The fence helps to impress upon visitors that we are trying to preserve something of worth and value. I am now thoroughly sold on the value of good fencing for historic monuments and properties.

There now remain three lines of development that should be carried out to complete the “Pearson” project. First, plumbing facilities should be installed, including running water in our museum to carry out a miniature Mississippi River exhibit with steamboat models properly mounted in the stream and a mural background depicting the shores as they appeared in the era when as many as eighteen hundred boats tied up at Winona in a single navigation season. Second, electricity should be provided to properly illuminate the exterior and add magic touches to the interior museum lighting. Third, larger smokestacks with old-fashioned spark arresters on top, and fancy anchors or stars on the crossbars between them, should be added. We also plan to install some attractive decorations on top of the pilothouse, following a design worked out by one of our members, Miss Elizabeth Millam. These additions, we hope, will complete the development of a fine museum that will tell future generations much about steamboating on the upper Mississippi.

Word has just been received from the Wilkie Foundation that it will make another grant of five thousand dollars to pay for these remaining features in the restoration of the “Pearson.” In underwriting the steamboat project, the foundation recognized the importance of preserving an old stern-wheeler as one of man’s trusty tools. Its support came at a time when aid was crucial to the boat’s preservation. Future generations will thank members of the Wilkie family for their foresight. Their gift is also a compliment to Winona, of which they have happy memories connected with their childhood and young manhood. The city can be proud of its sons, as well as of the steamboat museum they made possible.

THE WINONA COUNTY Historical Society’s experience in acquiring its four properties has led us to develop a program that involves specialized museums. We are now thinking of using the schoolhouse exclusively for displays pertaining to the rural schools of our county. The Bunnell House, when finished, will be a museum depicting living conditions of the 1850s. The steamboat will be devoted exclusively to upper Mississippi River lore. The museum in the Lumberman’s Building is concerned primarily with the history of the city of Winona and of lumbering. We hope, eventually, to have a building in Farmers Community Park, in the center of the county, where we can display the interesting old agricultural implements, delivery wagons, fire engines, and other vehicles that have already been added to the society’s collections or that have been promised. It might be possible also to acquire the Huff-Lamberton home that you visited, which would be an appropriate place for an exhibit dealing with Henry D. Huff, who in 1853 suggested that the name of our city be changed from Montezuma to Winona. The home could also be used to depict the important role that Henry W. Lamberton and members of his family played in a century of residence here as bankers, railroad builders, and the like.

UPON the conclusion of Dr. Younger’s remarks, members of his audience had good reason for believing that, even without the latter projects mentioned by the speaker, Winona County can boast of the most extensive and diversified local historical museums now to be found in any Minnesota community.