

THE 1921 ANNUAL MEETING OF THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society on January 17, 1921, was a departure from precedent. Previous meetings, as a rule, have consisted merely of a business session followed by the annual address. This year, in the hope of attracting a larger attendance, especially from outside the Twin Cities, by a more extensive and varied program, arrangements were made for sessions extending throughout the day, and the results were such as to justify the change.

The meeting opened at 10:00 A. M. with a "Conference on Historical Activities in Minnesota," which was held in the auditorium of the society's building and was attended by about thirty-five people. The first subject taken up was "The Historical Work of Hereditary and Patriotic Societies," which was presented by Mr. Willoughby M. Babcock Jr., curator of the society's museum. Mr. Babcock pointed out that numerous organizations in Minnesota are engaged in some sort of historical work and that prominent among them, naturally, are the hereditary and patriotic societies. Correlation and coördination of these activities with the work of the state historical society must be accomplished, however, if the field of Minnesota history is to be covered thoroughly. As one means of bringing the various groups into touch with the state society, he suggested institutional memberships in that society, so that a network of organizations interested in local history may be built up throughout Minnesota. A scheme for the division of the field of Minnesota history might be worked out, by means of which these various groups could each concentrate upon one phase and make possible the systematic study of the whole subject under the direction of the Minnesota Historical Society. The work of marking the historic sites in each community and of investigating, collecting, preserving, and publishing the rec-

ords and archives of the state and its subdivisions should be undertaken with vigor by these well-organized and active societies. In other states the hereditary and patriotic societies, recognizing the need for trained historical workers, have provided research funds to be expended under the direction of the state historical agency. Thus far the Minnesota Historical Society has not been able to publish much of its valuable source material, such as the journals of Major Taliaferro, the Indian agent at Fort Snelling from 1819 to 1840, or the Sibley Papers, because of lack of funds. By providing the money for the publication of such material, the hereditary and patriotic societies would be rendering signal service to the cause of Minnesota history.

Mr. R. W. G. Vail, the society's librarian, spoke next on "The Field for Local and Special Historical Societies." He said that the easiest way to interest people in the preservation and use of historical material is to begin at home, and he advocated the use of such agencies as schools, churches, libraries, women's clubs, rotary clubs, farmers' organizations, and fraternal orders to promote the organization and development of a local historical society in each community. Such societies, he said, should be particularly active in preserving the township and county records, which in so many places have been allowed to remain in unsafe and inadequate quarters, where they are neither protected from fire nor available for consultation. Local historical societies should also assume the responsibility for preserving complete files of all local newspapers, in order that future students of the history of the town or county may find the materials which they need most for their work. This task is so great that no state society can well afford the large expense of caring for files of all the newspapers of the state. The local society also should see that vital records are carefully preserved. During the war many people found it necessary to locate their birth records in order to secure passports. In hundreds of cases they discovered that, though these records were made at the time, no agency had

cared to insure their preservation and they had been destroyed. Local societies should preserve not only public records and newspapers but also the correspondence, diaries, account books, and other records of the individuals of the community. They should collect typical examples of utensils and other objects illustrative of life in the early days, not forgetting to save significant material of their own time. This material is as necessary as the public records if the student of the community's past is to reconstruct with any accuracy the development of its life.

In many localities, said Mr. Vail, there are special groups interested in the history and development of a particular phase of the communal life. These have excellent opportunities, because of their special knowledge and interests, to preserve the history of the work done in their own group or their own field of activity. Such are the various foreign language communities found in every state, the many religious groups, and the bodies of people interested in the development of a special trade or industry. They should not forget to record their own history as it is made and should be encouraged to form historical societies for the preservation of that part of their state's history with which they are most intimately concerned. These special historical societies should also coöperate with the state society in the preservation of their own history. They should see that their manuscript and published records are carefully saved. Correspondence, advertising material, periodicals published by their group, photographs illustrative of their history, prospectuses, propaganda, sermons, tracts, and circulars — all should be preserved.

The speaker placed particular emphasis on the need of close coöperation between the smaller societies and the state society. The local societies, he said, should look to the state society for useful suggestions as to what to collect and how to make it of the greatest possible use to the community. They should make every effort to preserve in some safe place, such as a corner in the local library, armory, or courthouse, the detailed and

intimate records of the growth of their particular communities; but such records as have a state-wide importance should be sent to the state historical society for preservation, thus making them available to all scholars interested in the state's history. The state society, on the other hand, should not try to secure the distinctly local material in such communities as have local societies, but should keep an accurate record of the collections of such societies and at all times coöperate in building them up.

The general discussion was then opened by Dr. Joseph Schafer, superintendent of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Dr. Schafer took up first the matter of marking historic sites and trails, told of the work being done by the Daughters of the American Revolution in Wisconsin, and pointed out that this organization, with chapters in various parts of the state, is in a position to make a complete survey of the opportunities for the marking of the old trails and the sites of historic events, of old forts, and of Indian mounds. He expressed approval of the suggestion that hereditary and patriotic societies should undertake to promote the publication of historical material and called attention to the valuable work in that field already done by the national society of the Daughters of the American Revolution. He thought that use might be made also of pioneer societies as a basis for the promotion of effective historical work and told how the Oregon Historical Society had been an outgrowth of the pioneer spirit in that state.

Dr. Schafer considered that the great mass of the people might be given the historical point of view through the schools. Most people are tremendously interested in themselves, in their families, and in what their relatives have done, and by taking advantage of these natural interests it would be possible to build up historical-mindedness among the people of our own and the next generation. He gave as an example an account of his experience in a school in Oregon with a questionnaire designed to bring out information about personal and family history and the location of letters, documents, and clippings,

and photographs of past and present homes. The result, he said, was a very complete history of the movements of parents, who came perhaps from Massachusetts, stopped in Ohio, Michigan, or Minnesota, and then crossed the plains. He told also of the experiment of the Wisconsin Historical Society in collecting information about old homesteads in the state which had been in the same family for sixty years. A request for such information, published in the papers, brought prompt responses from large numbers of people, with the result that much valuable historical material was collected. It was demonstrated that, by an appeal to their personal pride and their interest in themselves and their families, people can readily be induced to participate in historical work.

Mrs. Frank Jerrard, chairman of the Sibley House committee of the Minnesota Daughters of the American Revolution, then told of the work of that organization in restoring the old Sibley House at Mendota and assembling in it an historical museum. This house, the oldest building in Minnesota which was used as a residence, was built by Henry Hastings Sibley, who later became the first governor of the state, and it also served temporarily as the first executive office of the territory, being used by Governor Ramsey for that purpose in 1849. In 1910, through the recommendation of the late Archbishop Ireland, the house and two lots were deeded by the St. Peter's Parish of Mendota to the St. Paul chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, with the understanding that the house should be restored and used for historic purposes. The chapter then deeded it to the state organization so that all the chapters might help in the work of making the place "the Mount Vernon of Minnesota." The old house, of which little except the walls remained, was restored, as nearly as possible, to its original condition. The rooms were equipped with furnishings of the type it contained when occupied by General Sibley, including some of the original pieces, and many museum objects illustrative of the pioneer period

were installed. Eight and a half lots adjacent to the place were later acquired by the St. Paul chapter and added to its original gift, and the land is being laid out as a park. The success of this enterprise is shown by the fact that over three thousand people visit the Sibley House every year. The leader in the work at the start was the late Mrs. D. W. MacCourt, to whom too much credit cannot be given. Her work was followed by that of Mrs. Cyrus H. Wells, Mrs. George C. Squires, and Mrs. James T. Morris, and now, under the leadership of Mrs. Marshall Coolidge, the Sibley House Association looks forward to a glorious future.

Miss Mary V. Carney, instructor in history in Central High School, St. Paul, spoke of the necessity of arousing historical interest early in life and of the use which could be made of the schools in this connection. She suggested the placing of an historical museum for the community in the school building as an excellent means to this end, or, when this is not feasible, the arrangement of a temporary historical exhibit in connection with the celebration of some anniversary such as May 11 — statehood day. The teachers, however, would need the coöperation and assistance of the people interested in history, for most of them have no special training for work of this sort and, being newcomers in the community, do not know where the desirable material could be found. The children would become interested in locating historic objects and in arranging the exhibit. Some of them could make models of such things as a birch bark canoe and a Red River cart, thus illustrating the development of transportation. Those who contributed to the exhibit would be sure to come and bring their friends, and the interest aroused might lead to the establishment of a local historical society for the permanent preservation of historical material.

The second session, held also in the auditorium, began at 2:00 P. M. and was devoted to the reading of historical papers. Professor William Anderson of the University of Minnesota

read the first paper, which was entitled "Minnesota Territorial Politics and the Constitutional Convention."¹ The Minnesota constitution of 1857, he said, was drawn up and adopted, not as the result of calm and impartial deliberation, but in the smoke and the din of a bitter partisan contest. The struggle was highly complicated. Minnesota Territory was to be divided in order that the most populous portion might be admitted to the Union as a state. This raised the whole question of boundaries on the west and the north. Then there was the strife of parties, the newly organized Republicans against the numerous but poorly regimented Democrats. Minnesota has probably never seen partisanship more rancorous and violent than at this time. The clash of sectional and economic interests was also present. The newly settled counties south of the Minnesota River and west of the Mississippi were predominantly agricultural and Republican. They were underrepresented in the legislative assembly and later in the constitutional convention, and they were without any of the important territorial institutions. Naturally they were resentful of the dominance of St. Paul, St. Anthony, and Stillwater in the affairs of Minnesota. These three towns were distant from southern Minnesota and all were east of the Mississippi; they were predominantly Democratic; and they had monopolized the chief territorial institutions, the capitol, the university, and the prison. Their interests were in lumbering, the fur trade, and general commerce quite as much as in agriculture. It was the wish of the leaders in southern Minnesota to have an agricultural state stretching westward to the Missouri River but reaching northward to a parallel just a little above St. Paul. In such a state St. Peter hoped to become the capital and Winona the seat of the university, while the rival towns of St. Paul, St. Anthony, and Stillwater would be isolated in the northeastern corner. The railroads would be built to run

¹The substance of this paper has been embodied in the author's book entitled *A History of the Constitution of Minnesota*, which is reviewed *post*, pp. 41-44.

from Winona and La Crescent westward to the Missouri. On the other hand the leaders in the St. Paul region desired a Minnesota of diversified resources and industries, stretching northward to the Canadian boundary but westward only to a line running from Canada southward along the Red River of the North to and through Lakes Traverse and Big Stone and thence to the Iowa line, and served by a system of railroads radiating out from St. Paul, the capital, and St. Anthony, the seat of the university. The story of the adoption of the Minnesota constitution and of the admission of the state to the Union is the dramatic unravelling of the plot the details of which are here only suggested.

The St. Paul region had all the advantages in the struggle, said Professor Anderson. The territorial organic act made St. Paul the capital. This little area was ideally located to be the railroad center of the proposed north and south state. Its chief citizen, Henry M. Rice, was the territorial delegate to Congress, was himself financially interested in St. Paul's prosperity and in making it a railroad center, and had the ear of the dominant party in Congress. He succeeded in getting Congress to pass an enabling act which divided Minnesota Territory by the north and south line sketched above and also in procuring a railroad land grant which made St. Paul the railroad center of the proposed state. Defeated in Washington, the southern Minnesota interests tried, early in 1857, with the aid of Governor Gorman, to forestall Rice's further success by immediately removing the capital to St. Peter; but they failed under the most exciting circumstances. In pursuance of the enabling act the members of the constitutional convention were elected on June 1, 1857, but the sectional cleavage and party bitterness created an atmosphere of such intense suspicion that the convention was split into two sections, Democratic and Republican. For seven weeks these bodies sat separately in opposite wings of the capitol at St. Paul. In the end they avoided further strife and possible bloodshed by agreeing to submit the same constitution to the people, though

two copies were made and each party signed its own copy. The Republicans and southern Minnesota had been defeated on almost every point. They lost in the boundary dispute, the location of the capital, the railroad land grant, and in practically everything else that they held dear, and they also lost the first state election. The Democrats even wrote most of the constitution. The Republicans succeeded, however, in writing into the constitution a very liberal amending clause, and from the time they took control of the state government in 1860 down to 1898, when the amending process was changed, they not only governed the state almost without break but they also wrote forty-six amendments into the constitution.

“Cleng Peerson and Norwegian Immigration” was the subject of the second paper, which was read by Professor Theodore C. Blegen of Hamline University.² The beginnings of nineteenth century Norwegian immigration, he said, are associated with Cleng Peerson, who in 1821 and again in 1824 came to America as the “advance agent” of those Norwegians who in 1825 crossed the Atlantic to found a settlement or colony in western New York. In 1833 Peerson explored the Central West, and in the following year he guided the pioneer group of Norse settlers in the West to a site which he had selected in the fertile Fox River Valley in Illinois. During three decades, from 1821 to 1850, Cleng Peerson was active as an immigrant leader, stimulating immigration and founding new settlements; in 1838 and again in 1842, he returned to Norway as a conscious propagandist of the movement. By nature a restless searcher for new frontiers, he made his way, in 1849, to Texas, and the next year he led to the South a group of Illinois settlers. In Texas Peerson lived from 1850 until his death in 1865 at the age of eighty-three.

The basis of his study, said Professor Blegen, was evidence, gleaned from several Peerson letters and a number of official documents and newspaper sources, which throws new light

² This paper is printed in full in the March, 1921, issue of the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*.

on several much controverted points with regard both to Peerson himself and to the motives of the early emigration from Norway. While Peerson's eccentric personality and Peer Gynt nature have caused a haze of legend and uncertainty to envelop his name, unimpeachable documentary evidence proves that he was the pathfinder of the first group emigration from Norway to the United States, that he was the leader of the vanguard of the great Norwegian migration to the American West, and that his incessant travels, his reports of conditions, and his personal influence affected the course and gave impetus to the progress of the whole movement in the first twenty-five years of its history. In short, one must recognize in this curious leader of immigrants and restless follower of the frontier the trail-blazer of a population movement which, since 1825, has brought to America more than seven hundred thousand Norwegians.

The last paper of the program, by Professor John D. Hicks of Hamline University, was on "The Political Career of Ignatius Donnelly."³ Donnelly, said Professor Hicks, is known to literature as one of the ablest defenders of the theory that Bacon wrote Shakespeare, to archeology as a convincing expounder of the truth of Plato's Atlantis fable, to science as the author of a unique explanation of the geological formations of the drift age by contact of comets with the earth, and to American politics as the ardent advocate of practically every third party or reform organization that made its appearance between the close of the Civil War and the beginning of the twentieth century. He was one of that "border fringe of lunacy" of whom Theodore Roosevelt spoke — a convinced champion of every forward movement, but so utterly impractical as to be worse than useless in advancing the fortunes of even the most laudable reforms. From the date of his first appearance in politics in 1857 until the date of his death in

³ This paper was a condensation of a larger study with the same title which is to appear in the issue of the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* for June-September, 1921.

1901, no campaign within the state of Minnesota was complete without Donnelly in the role of champion of some new and untried reform. Antimonopolist, Greenbacker, Democrat, Republican, and Populist in turn, he was supremely indifferent always to change of party or even of opinion, and consistent only in this — that he always urged the success of those reforms and of that party which to his mind gave most promise of bettering the conditions of the ordinary man.

The business session of the society convened in the auditorium at 4:00 P. M. The principal business transacted, in addition to the presentation of reports of the treasurer and the superintendent,⁴ was the election of thirty life members of the society to serve as members of the executive council for the triennium 1921-24. The following were elected: Everett H. Bailey, John M. Bradford, the Reverend William Busch, Oliver Crosby, William W. Cutler, Frederic A. Fogg, Mrs. Charles E. Furness, Harold Harris, Frederick G. Ingersoll, Gideon S. Ives, William H. Lightner, Charles P. Noyes, Victor Robertson, Edward P. Sanborn, Charles Stees, Warren Upham, Olin D. Wheeler, and Edward B. Young of St. Paul; Clarence W. Alvord, Solon J. Buck, William W. Folwell, Guy Stanton Ford, Herschel V. Jones and Mrs. James T. Morris of Minneapolis; Lorin Cray of Mankato; Michael J. Dowling of Olivia; Burt W. Eaton of Rochester; Victor E. Lawson of Willmar; William A. McGonagle of Duluth; and Willis M. West of Grand Rapids.

At the close of the business session of the society, the new executive council, which includes six state officers, ex officio, in addition to the members elected, met in the superintendent's office and elected the following officers of the society for the triennium: Frederic A. Fogg, president; William W. Folwell, first vice president; Frederick G. Ingersoll, second vice president; Solon J. Buck, secretary; and Everett H. Bailey, treasurer.

⁴ The substance of the superintendent's report is embodied in the *Twenty-first Biennial Report* of the society.

The most notable event of the meeting was the subscription dinner in honor of Dr. William W. Folwell, which was held in the reading room of the Historical Building at 6:00 P. M. The occasion of the dinner was the completion of the first volume of Dr. Folwell's *History of Minnesota*, then in press; and the attendance of over two hundred taxed the available space. The retiring president of the society, the Honorable Gideon S. Ives, presented as toastmaster the Honorable J. A. O. Preus, Governor of Minnesota, whose apt introductions of the speakers contributed to the interest of the occasion. The first toast was by Dr. Lotus D. Coffman, president of the University of Minnesota, who told of Dr. Folwell's service in promoting the development of high schools and building up a unified system of public education in the state. The next speaker was Professor Clarence W. Alvord, editor of the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, whose toast follows:

When it was proposed to me that on this most honorable occasion and in the presence of this notable assembly I make an after-dinner speech, my first inclination was to return the answer of the impecunious dandy when asked to change a ten dollar bill — "I thank ye for the compliment," he said — for I am impecunious in the light and airy art of after-dinner speaking. Were I a statesman as Governor Preus is, or a university president as is Dr. Coffman, then by native ability and by long practice I should have become a master of this popular art. But instead of learning to speak to men after dinner, when smug satisfaction has prepared the mind to laughter at the most antique of jokes, unkind fate has forced me to associate with dusty tomes, illegible manuscripts, and antique documents, to make companions of men whose mortal remains have long since turned to dust and whose deeds, both good and ill, the kind hand of oblivion has covered with the deep forgetfulness of generations. Instead of serving new scandals after dinner, I have labored to revive old scandals and dress them up that they might be made palatable to the satiated taste of the modern reader.

But when I learned that it was not the ordinary after-dinner speech that was expected from me, that I was being asked to

say a few words about the work of a fellow craftsman whose field of labor has lain for years almost contiguous to the one I had been cultivating, I accepted the invitation with eagerness; and I appear here tonight to give greetings from all true worshippers of the muse Clio to my companion in dusty tomes and antique documents, Dr. Folwell.

You are tonight not Colonel Folwell as your soldiers knew you; nor Professor Folwell as your students knew you; nor President Folwell as your faculty and the world have long known you; but Historian Folwell, who has told the story of the development of this great state of Minnesota for your own and future generations to read. We, your fellow craftsmen and fellow citizens, are gathered here tonight that we may honor ourselves by showing you our appreciation of this magnificent accomplishment.

The writing of a state history is not the easy job that it was in former years, when the average local history was the amateurish work of some retired lawyer or broken-down politician, who, out of his inner consciousness, with no thought of historical criticism, wove his web of narrative. The product of the modern scientific historian differs from such amateurish work as much as Milton's "Paradise Lost" differs from a sophomoric effusion in the *Minnesota Daily*. The easy days of history writing are no more. Clio makes greater demands upon her worshippers. They are now associated, so to speak, into an established church; to their goddess they have raised an altar at which they perform a solemn service, with genuflections and processions, with oil and frankincense, occult ceremonies to inspire awe in the multitude; all is more or less esoteric in character; at least the uninitiated finds difficulty in making his way to the inner shrine. I mean by this symbolism that historians in their effort to make history a science have evolved a complex method of research that is highly technical in its processes and scientific in its spirit.

Within the inner circle of historians Dr. Folwell belongs. He has produced a work that maintains all the canons of historical scholarship. His mind is critical; hearsay and tradition do not satisfy it; the truth as found in contemporary narrative or document has laid the basis of his history. Information has been sought in every conceivable source. He has not neglected the monographs of other historians, but laboriously has he sought out their writings buried in hundreds of magazines, pro-

ceedings of learned societies, and other books. His footnotes sometimes take the form of little essays on the source material, and very valuable they will prove themselves to the studious. Minnesota is to be congratulated on possessing a history of herself that will take its place on the shelves of libraries as a product of a modern historian, a veritable high priest of Clio who is a thorough master of her worship and of the philosophy of her creed; few states of our Union can make a similar boast.

But Dr. Folwell possesses a great advantage over the average historian. He is, as I have said, a trained historian; but at the same time he can quote concerning the events of which he writes the words of Aeneas, *et quorum pars magna fui*. His has been an active life; he has associated intimately with the men who have made Minnesota, and from him has issued a force that has aided in the development of the state. Thus he writes with a surety derived from a knowledge of the men and of the events that gives to his narrative a life that is so often lacking in historical works. Personally I have been charmed with his production, and I believe that many readers will find in it a quality in scholarship and literary style that will make the reading of it a long remembered pleasure.

In closing, Dr. Folwell, let me, as a representative of the historical fraternity, congratulate you on the completion of this history. By this most recent work of scholarship you have added to the glory that you had already won as soldier, professor, university president, and leader in all movements to promote the best interests of your city and state.

Mr. Frederick G. Ingersoll then told of Dr. Folwell's relations with the Minnesota Historical Society and pointed out the importance of the work which the society has done and is doing in collecting and preserving the materials on which such contributions to the knowledge of the past as that which Dr. Folwell is producing must be based. The services of the guest of honor as president of the university were described by Mr. Fred B. Snyder, one of his former students and now president of the board of regents of the university. To these toasts Dr. Folwell responded with a sparkling address, in which he told of some of his experiences in the investigation of interesting and humorous incidents in Minnesota history.

The last session of the meeting, which was held in the auditorium in the evening, was devoted to the annual address. Dr. Joseph Schafer, superintendent of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, was the speaker and his subject was "The Microscopic Method as Applied to History." This address, which is printed elsewhere in this number of the *BULLETIN*, dealt with the problems and possibilities of intensive historical work in all the townships of a state and told something of the plans of the Wisconsin Historical Society for such work.



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