

---

# THE editor's PAGE

---

## ORGANIZING FOR HISTORY

MUCH HAS BEEN SAID and written in the decade just past about the marked upsurge of interest in history on the part of Americans. One way to test this claim on home ground is to travel around Minnesota and see what is being done by county and local historical societies.

That a strong sense of the past has taken firm root in all parts of the state is unmistakable. The impressive growth of county and local historical programs can be measured in many ways: increased membership; larger budgets; expanded activities; full-time staffs; new acquisition of books, photographs, manuscripts, and museum items; ambitious marker programs; audio-visual presentations; sites and buildings protected from the onslaught of the bulldozer; lectures; county, township, and community histories. In a number of counties fine new museums have been erected — Pope, Freeborn, Grant, Koochiching, and Kandiyohi, to name only a few — while in others, like Watonwan, such buildings are on the drawing boards. Other counties have improved older buildings housing museums.

While several county historical societies in the state have been active for many years, the growth of local history as an organized movement has occurred within the past generation. It received a powerful stimulus from the observance of the Minnesota Territorial Centennial in 1949 and was reinforced nine years later by the celebration of the Statehood Centennial. Also helping to create a favorable climate were two laws enacted by the state legislature. A 1953 statute, later liberalized, permitted county boards to make a special tax levy for the support of historical work, and in 1957 the legislature enabled them to provide physical facilities and maintenance for historical societies. While a number of counties have yet to take advantage of this legislation, the trend has been toward an increasingly sympathetic response by boards of commissioners.

Although budget problems still plague virtually every

historical society regardless of size, a new survey of "The Financial Needs of Historical Organizations in the United States and Canada," soon to be issued by the American Association for State and Local History, holds at least two revelations of major significance for Minnesota. First, the study shows that the principle that preservation of history is a legitimate responsibility of local government has received its widest and most sympathetic support in the Middle West. Second, Minnesota leads the fifty states in the amount of public funds granted for historical purposes by boards of county commissioners. A survey conducted two years ago by the Minnesota Historical Society indicated that annual county support for historical societies approximated a half million dollars and that more than half of the state's eighty-seven counties are granted such support on a regular basis.

Paralleling the steady growth of county organizations during the past decade have been two other significant trends. Regional organizations, bringing counties and an occasional local group together, have taken on an important role. Notable among these are the First District Historical Assembly (the counties of southeastern Minnesota), the Central Minnesota Historical Association, and the interstate and international Red River Valley Historical Society. Through meetings and workshops these groups have stimulated new ideas and experiments.

More recently another movement has gained momentum — the formation of local historical organizations. A few local societies, such as Spring Valley and Western Hennepin (Long Lake), have existed for some time. But they were rare. During the 1960s historical societies mushroomed in suburbs ringing the Twin Cities — Richfield, Edina, St. Louis Park, Mound, Minnetonka, Bloomington, and White Bear Lake. Paralleling, to a lesser degree, the proliferation of local organizations around Minneapolis and St. Paul has been the emergence of a number of local historical societies in St. Louis County — Ely-Winton, Hoyt Lakes, and Tower-Soudan. Others, like Sauk Rapids, have appeared close

to smaller urban areas, and some have been established far from population centers — at Paynesville and Warroad, for example.

Thus, over the past generation local history in Minnesota has become an extensive enterprise with firm “grass roots” participation and support in more than a hundred communities. This is a broad and stable base, one would think, on which to build for the future. Ultimately, however, the values and uses of history must not be judged by the number of organizations and buildings, by the size of commemorations and displays, or by the quantity of money spent. They will be determined by the individuals who accept or reject the past as a meaningful and vital force in their lives.

As we enter the 1970s the relevance of history to today's world is being widely questioned. The staggering immensity of social and technological change has made the “now” generation wonder whether the past has indeed anything of real importance to teach it. Others argue that the traditional interpretation of American history is in fact only the history of the dominant ethnic group — or a glorification of the lucky winners in a vast free-for-all of exploitation that we have traditionally looked upon as building civilization in a wilderness. In meeting the challenges posed by a new decade and by a new generation of relentlessly honest young people, history must be prepared to look at the past through fresh lenses. The easy and agreeable assumptions with which we have always regarded it must be re-examined — not only on the level of national history but on the local level as well.

We may be startled at some of the insights that appear if for a moment we reverse our field of vision and look at the story of a town or county or region through the eyes of its losers. We may see Indians driven from their homes and told by a chorus of well-meaning voices that nowhere down all the future is there a place for their holy beliefs and cherished customs — that to survive they must deny their identity and become white men. We may see immigrants, torn between hope for the new world and homesickness for the old, watching their children slowly weaned from the old ways and the old language to become foreigners under their very roofs. We will see towns dead or dying along with the hopes that built them when the railroad locates elsewhere; we will see farmers driven under by drought or debt or grasshoppers, packing up their few belongings and sadly moving on; we will see game destroyed, forests leveled, hillsides eroded, and streams polluted by careless greed. And inevitably the question will arise: what have we now, and is it worth the cost? For some the answer may be yes, for others, no — but if history is to have meaning for the present and future, the questions must be honestly faced.

The task will not be easy, but the years of mounting support for history in our local communities place us now in a strong position to meet the challenge of the 1970s. We have the organization, the interest, and the financial commitment. Do we also have the vision? If we do, we may yet be able to demonstrate that the story of the past carries a vital message for the future.

Russell W. Fridley, Editor in Chief



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).