
MHS activities

“WELCOME to the Minnesota State Capitol. Today we will talk about the history of the state, the art and architecture of this building, and the functions of state government.” In this manner uniformed guides introduce approximately 120,000 visitors to the Capitol each year through a tour program developed during the last year and a half by the educational services department of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Prior to the 1969 legislative session the state department of administration, the agency then in charge of tours, asked the society to take over the Capitol tour function. It was felt that the transfer would be appropriate because of the historic significance of the Capitol and the society's involvement in an educational program. The society accepted the responsibility with the understanding that it would make a survey of the existing situation, explore the potential for tours, and finally present a total package for a program that would present the Capitol as a historic site, an art museum, and the seat of government.

At that time the guide staff was made up of two full-time employees. There was little control over the number of people scheduled to go through the building at a given time, and the literature available for visitors consisted of general information about Minnesota rather than data on the Capitol or the functions of state government.

The legislature expected that service to visitors would be improved but otherwise allowed the planners freedom. Its only stipulation was that tours should be conducted on weekends for those who are unable to visit the Capitol during regular office hours. Weekend tours were added in July, 1969, and the society took over the responsibility for group scheduling and for guide positions, but otherwise the basic program remained unchanged until modification possibilities could be studied.

Diana Gagner, assistant educational supervisor, began the investigation by taking Capitol tours herself. She soon noted that there is more to the program than giving tours, because, for example, guides have to field

such questions as “Where do I get a fishing license?”, “How do I obtain a birth certificate?”, and “Where is there a good place to eat lunch in St. Paul?”

Subsequently, plans were discussed with members of the legislature, representatives of the governor's office and of the supreme court, staff representatives of the senate and house, individuals from the State Arts Council, and others who were interested in the success of the program. Their advice was of great assistance.

An early decision was that the program must be capable of handling the expected and yet flexible enough to meet the unexpected — such as groups that arrive without having been scheduled in advance, or groups which show up late, or those who have made special arrangements to meet government officials.

It was also decided that control had to be established over the number of visitors allowed in the building at one time. We determined that the best group size is thirty persons, or one school class, and that four groups totaling 120 persons can be moved through the Capitol with maximum efficiency. For one thing, a guide can speak to a group of thirty without shouting and thus can keep to a minimum the disturbance to workers in the building. For another, a group of that size creates little congestion and, by being separate from other classes, offers a favorable learning situation and permits the guide to adjust to any special needs the group may have.

Although the present setup has somewhat decreased the number of people going through the building each hour, it has increased the availability of tours from six to eight a day. Tours are also given every day of the year except New Year's, Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

Ten part-time guides are hired during the school year. This number is increased to thirteen or fourteen during legislative sessions. The guides are provided with uniforms of blue and gold — the state colors — and thus are easily identifiable for visitors who want to ask questions.

The society has developed a pool of part-time col-

lege students for guides. One reason for this is to build into the program a turnover in personnel, thus permitting new people to bring new enthusiasm to the job. It takes an unusual person to repeat the same tour with zeal several times each day for a number of years. Although such people did act as guides for a long time, the society felt that they constituted an exception rather than a rule to build the program upon.

Another factor in having guides work four hours a day is that they do not need to take time for lunch and, if necessary, can work without breaks. Also, the guide pool of students from colleges and universities within the metropolitan area makes available a number of young people who can fill in in emergencies. A fourth consideration is that students represent all parts of the state and therefore illustrate to visitors the state-wide aspects of the program, even though the Capitol is in St. Paul.

In addition to guides, there was need for a brochure on the Capitol to direct those who prefer exploring on their own and also to furnish some information — like materials that went into the building — that can be treated better in printed form than verbally. Mrs. Gagner, with the assistance of the society's audio-visual library and publications department, created such a brochure. Both handsome and compact, it presents a brief history of the Minnesota Capitol and its predecessors, discusses architect Cass Gilbert, lists art within the building, and includes floor plans and a descriptive text for self-guided tours.

After six months of careful examination of the potential for the Capitol tour program, planners decided that the educational supervisor should investigate some other tour programs around the country and trade ideas with those who had gone through a similar questioning process. Therefore, I visited the capitols of Arkansas, Texas, Alabama, Georgia, Virginia, and New York, the United States Capitol in Washington, and the United Nations building in New York City (little

attention should be paid to comments that several Southern states were selected because the tour was made in January!). Practically all the institutions visited face essentially the same kinds of problems. The greatest benefit of the trip was to see how these problems were solved and to confirm conclusions arrived at concerning the Minnesota program. It also helped to take part in discussions concerning common problems.

Following this trip the final outline of the Minnesota State Capitol program was submitted to the legislative advisory committee in March, 1970. With the approval of the basic concepts and provision of financial support, the program was put into practice.

Since spontaneity is the key to any successful guide presentation, the college students hired are free, within certain limitations, to develop their own tours. They are given an outline of the basic points to be covered but otherwise assume responsibility for what they say. Further, emphasis is placed on the building itself, letting the impressive Capitol "speak" through the guides.

The basic premises upon which the program is built have proved sound. There are, of course, refinements to be made, but these will come through time and experience. The question that staff members continually ask themselves is whether or not, as representatives of the Minnesota Historical Society and the State of Minnesota, they are giving to all who visit the Capitol their full efforts in making tours informative and enjoyable.

Although the tour program is just one phase of the total Capitol atmosphere, it probably leaves with people — more than any other public service function in the building — a positive or negative feeling toward state government. If people are met in a friendly, courteous, and considerate manner, then the guide program has helped to create a positive impression of Minnesota and its people. That is its primary objective.

VIKI SAND, *Educational Supervisor*



SANDRA SCHNEIDER of the University of Minnesota shows visitors the State Capitol.



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