American Folklore and the Historian. By Richard M. Dorson.

(Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1971. xii, 239 p. $7.95.)

Does the history of Minnesota include the disputed legend of the Kensington rune stone, the dreams of Minnesota contained in immigrant songs and letters, the stories explaining how the towns, counties, and lakes got their names, the yarns about Floyd B. Olson and Charles A. Lindbergh, Jr., and the humorous stories told about Norwegians and Swedes? Richard M. Dorson does not ask these questions in this book about folklore and history, but if he did, he would answer in the affirmative.

Professor Dorson presents in this volume a theory of how folklore undergirds American history. In a way, the book is a history of Dorson's intellectual career, for the essays appearing here have been read at conferences and published in magazines and books since 1945. He opens with a paper entitled "A Theory for American Folklore" and argues that the historical framework of colonization, westward movement, slavery and sectional conflict, immigration, and economic resources and geography could be enriched through investigation of beliefs, traditions, and songs of the common folk. The first essay is followed by "The Theory of American Folklore Revisited" in which he enlarges the theory and takes issue with some of his critics in the historical profession. In other chapters he relates folklore to American studies, cultural history, state and local history, and literature, and shows the role of lore in these areas of study. It is an impressive argument wrapped in voluminous bibliographical support and documentation.

In the years that Dorson has worked to make folklore a scholarly discipline and a proper field of research, history has been moving slowly toward folklore's corner. The work of Theodore C. Blegen has helped broaden the discipline to include folk history and helped give state and local history an improved status. In recent years, historians have renewed their interest in interviewing and taping the reminiscences of people who never went to Congress or never kept a diary of their workaday life. Dorson reminds historians that other, less literate, peoples - immigrants, Indians, ghetto Negroes - invite the collectors of oral traditions and folk memory.

This volume may not save many souls, not because the historian will reject the definitions of folklore and the theory of its use in American history, but because the academic historian has his own folk beliefs about history and how to get along in the profession. He believes that advancement lies in publication of national history based on published or written documents. He believes the word "folklore" means such quaint beliefs as thinning blood with sassafras tea and not the folk knowledge of how a Minnesota pioneer "knew" good land when he saw it. This volume puts together Dorson's contributions to a scientific definition of folklore and a theory of how the obscure oral tradition can strengthen and humanize history. He has long labored to separate "fakelore" from folklore and has been a strong critic of those who pervert the oral tradition for commercial purposes. The influence of this volume will be seen when (and if) some publisher offers the history of a state or the nation entitled "The History and Lore of ."

Reviewed by Walker D. Wyman, professor of history at Wisconsin State University at River Falls and a frequent reviewer of folklore history for this magazine.


(Syracuse, New York, Syracuse University Press, 1971. ix, 362 p. Illustrations. $12.00.)

Historians have shown little interest in twentieth-century American Indian history, and published material on this period is invariably part of general tribal histories. Hazel W. Hertzberg has taken a different approach in The Search for an American Indian Identity. Her interest is in pan-Indian movements from 1900 to 1934. The result is an important and informative book on a topic that, with the exception of the peyote cult, is unfamiliar to both Indians and non-Indians.

Pan-Indianism took several forms during the first third of the twentieth century. Founded in 1911 in the midst of the progressive era, the Society of American Indians was the first and most important pan-Indian reform organization. It was representative of progressivism and consisted largely of educated, middle-class, non-reservation
By 1890 the advance of urban industrialism and a corresponding retreat of the frontier of virgin land was straining the credibility of the national self-image that visualized Americans as "a chosen people" whose "ancestors had escaped from the cultural complexity of Europe, a complexity characterized by conflict, to the natural simplicity of the New World where timeless peace was possible." The consequent cultural crisis evoked varying responses within the American community. Perceiving finance capitalism as a nefarious conspiracy threatening the nation's pristine innocence, Ignatius Donnelly believed the power of government should be mobilized on a massive scale "to preserve the national covenant with nature." Economist and sociologist William Graham Sumner drew a diametrically opposite conclusion. He argued that enhancing the role of government was a step toward Old World "cultural complexity" which would imperil progress. With some oversimplification, it can be said that when confronted with the apparent impossibility of preserving both laissez-faire and a yeoman-based democracy—two cherished American values—Donnelly chose to sacrifice the former and Sumner the latter.

Following the lead of historian Charles A. Beard, the dominant wing of national progressivism responded to the crisis by interpreting industrialism as an evolutionary force which, if properly directed, would abolish medieval patterns of "cultural complexity" and eventuate in a final triumph of "natural" millennial simplicity and the American dream.

This notion, Noble argues persuasively, informed the frames of reference of such diverse personalities as Henry Ford, John Dewey, Charles H. Cooley, Walter Rauschenbusch, Charles Ives, Frank Norris, and Theodore Roosevelt. In other words, it served as the cultural motif of the progressive era. Following the lead of historian Charles A. Beard, the dominant wing of national progressivism responded to the crisis by interpreting industrialism as an evolutionary force which, if properly directed, would abolish medieval patterns of "cultural complexity" and eventuate in a final triumph of "natural" millennial simplicity and the American dream.

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Space precludes comment on the many provocative issues raised by this volume. Not all readers will accept unreservedly every contention made, but most will agree that Noble has produced a coherent interpretation of progressivism's cultural impact.

Reviewed by CARL H. CHRISTEN, professor of history at Augsburg College and author of The Progressive Era in Minnesota, 1890-1918, soon to be published by the Minnesota Historical Society.

For space reasons, the "News & Notes" section has been omitted from this issue. It will appear again in the Winter, 1971, magazine.
Since 1849, when it was chartered by the first territorial legislature, the Minnesota Historical Society has been preserving a record of the state's history. Its outstanding library and its vast collection of manuscripts, newspapers, pictures, and museum objects reflect this activity. The society also interprets Minnesota's past, telling the story of the state and region through publications, museum displays, tours, institutes, and restoration of historic sites. The work of the society is supported in part by the state and in part by private contributions, grants, and membership dues. It is a chartered public institution governed by an executive council of interested citizens and belonging to all who support it through membership and participation in its programs. You are cordially invited to use its resources and to join in its efforts to make Minnesota a community with a sense of strength from the past and purpose for the future.

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