THESE overalls, worn by a farm boy in Lake Park about 1925, introduce the exhibit and suggest that the everyday clothing of ordinary people is a key exhibit theme.

THIS ESSAY was written as the Minnesota Historical Society began the fabrication and installation of a major new gallery exhibit, "The Clothes Off Our Backs: A Minnesota Collection," which opened in September in the North Gallery on the third floor of the society's main building at 690 Cedar Street. The exhibit was organized, researched, written, and designed by Tim Brennan, Joan Seidl, and Nicholas Westbrook, exhibits group in the educational services division, working with John Low of Miller-Dunwiddie Architects, and with advice and assistance from staff members in all divisions of the society, particularly Lolita Marie ("Lolly") Lundquist, registrar for the museum collections. The essay below illuminates the kinds of choices made in "translating" an enormous collection into an exhibit for a modest-sized gallery.

CLOTHES enjoy a peculiar status as artifacts in our lives. "Clothes make the man," we say in the age-old phrase, acknowledging the power of clothing as a tool for self-expression and recognizing that the clothes which cover our persons also reveal something of our personalities. We consume clothes in greater number and variety than perhaps any other form of our material culture. We can fill our closets from an infinite variety of choices, allowing wide expression of idiosyncracies. Yet
the choices we make testify mostly to our conformity to a
certain repertoire of social roles. Some clothes we treas­
ure as mementos of significant personal events. Yet other
garments which have witnessed moments of equal drama
or intimacy are disposed of without second thought, to
be recycled into other lives at a next-to-new shop.

Because of this relationship between artifact and
identity on one hand, and our conflicting desires to pre­
serve and discard on the other, clothes make up the
largest artifact category in the MHS museum collection.
What more personal way to claim a niche for ourselves in the
historical record than by presenting to the Historical
Society the garments which framed our moment in time
and which were emblematic of our roles in life? Since the
society began collecting more than a century and a quar­
ter ago, its holdings have grown to include nearly 10,000
donated clothing collections. The society holds our
state's historical wardrobe in trust for the people of Min­
nnesota, to be seen, studied, and enjoyed by all. Since the
society's main building was completed in 1917, affording
museum display space for the first time, exhibits and
programs based on the clothing collection have never
long been absent. In 1973, society staff members began
the long process of giving birth to the new exhibit.

What was there to choose from in the society’s closets?
Any form of historical interpretation necessarily de­
pends upon the strength of the sources it is based upon.
Exhibits are no exception. The choice of the theme and
thrust of the story are alike shaped by the artifacts, for
pictures and text alone are weak bridges if too many gaps
in the collection must be spanned.

The society’s clothing collection is large but some­
what uneven. Unfortunately, pressures on a tiny staff
simply to cope with the incoming flood of material have
not permitted the society to supplement the great but
random generosity of donors with a systematic scouting
out of representative examples to fill the gaps. For
example, the collections of accessories and even fabrics
and notions are surprisingly strong. Yet the society’s
clothing collection is not notable for such Minnesota-
manufactured goods as Red Wing shoes or Munsingwear
undergarments and sports clothes.

The collection is strongest in the clothing of well-to-
do white women who shared fully the luxuries of the
dominant American culture. It is next strongest in the
clothing of white children and nineteenth-century native
Americans. The white adults of the generation living be­
tween 1880 and 1900 are well-represented, since their
attic trunks have been coming to the Historical Society
on their deaths during the last forty years. Men are gen­
erally not well represented, except for military uniforms.
(Indeed an archaeologist unearthing the society’s collection
500 years from now might well imagine ours to be a
culture of a few men in military drab and a great many
women who wore bridal white.) There are few garments
of immigrants, workers, and twentieth-century Indians.

The collection is largely “dress-up” clothing, worn
when a person was on his or her best behavior (as one
would wish to be remembered) and worn infrequently
enough to be in good condition for donating to the so­
ciety. Work clothes, everyday clothes, clothes for just
“hanging around” are relatively rare in the collection.
“Ordinary” clothes have either been worn out or dis­
carded as too common to warrant historical notice. Per­
haps today, as we increasingly wear casual clothes to
church and other formerly dress-up events, the distinc­
tions will become sufficiently blurred to simplify the col­
clecting endeavors of future curators.

The collection is strong in clothes worn for specific
events: weddings, graduations, inaugural balls, Winter
Carnivals, military duty. But we have little information
about clothes that hung together as a wardrobe or that
were worn together as an outfit. For example, the so­
ciety preserves William Watts Folwell’s gloves, hats,
canes, suits, shoes, and even socks, but we have no sense
of which things Folwell wore in which combination on
which occasions. Struggling with the daily dilemma,
“What shall I put on today?” is one of the most frequent
of human activities, yet it is a historical process we have
difficulty reconstructing from the MHS resources.

The clothing collection has been better cataloged
than other artifact collections. Items are identified and
fairly precisely dated; some information about donors has
been preserved. Recently, scholars have begun to use
the collection for in-depth studies of historical fashions.
But for the most part, curatorial analysis of the collection
has not yet begun. Pressures on staff time have seldom
permitted collecting the contextual information neces­
sary to place the clothes in their proper social-historical
framework. What was the economic level of the owner of
the clothes? How old was the person when the clothes
were worn? How or where were the clothes obtained?
On what occasions were they worn? How did they make
the wearer feel — itchy, baggy, “with it,” out of style, or
as Minnesota artist Wanda Gag described herself in a
favorite plaid dress, “[un]afraid to meet the King of Eng­
land”?

In recent years the collecting policy has shifted to
emphasize well-documented Minnesota material. But
years of careful clothing collection development lie
ahead before this, the strongest of the artifact col­
clections, matches in organization and completeness the so­
ciety’s traditionally strong collections of manuscripts,
newspapers, and books. That change will come gradually
as staff, scholars, and the general public increasingly
recognize that the clothes a man or woman wore can
offer insights as rich as any to be found in his or her
diary.
What kind of exhibit could be created from the collection?

Certain broad goals were established at the outset. The exhibit should have a very generous time frame, extending to the present. It should be cross-cultural. It should focus as much as possible (given the collection) on the experience of ordinary people. It should harken where feasible to familiar themes in Minnesota history. But the central organizing concept emerged somewhat later out of our own confusions.

The unevenness of the collection notwithstanding, its strengths were sufficient to allow us to consider half a dozen thematic alternatives which would have resulted in very different exhibits than the present one. We could have prepared a survey history of changes in high fashion. We might have displayed the clothing of famous Minnesotans, such as Folwell, Alexander Ramsey, Frank B. Kellogg, or the wives of governors. We could have explored the technological history of how clothing has been made. We might have presented modes of wearing various sorts of clothes over time. We could have taken an anthropological approach, examining the use of clothes in various social rituals.

In early planning discussions, talking out the implications of pursuing each of the alternatives, we realized that we were referring to the artifacts both as costumes and as clothes — and that those two concepts were significantly different. Costumes are empty shells, ephemeral, fantastic disguises that are rented for an evening masquerade and then are returned and forgotten. They preserve no particular human life within them. But clothes are our second skins, into which are woven our cultural and personal identities, through which we signal to others our moods, values, aspirations, traditions, occupation, and wealth. Clothes have people inside them.

The exhibit therefore stresses the importance of the cultural and personal expressiveness of clothing. It tries to enable visitors to imagine specific historical people inside their clothes by combining garments with complementary artifacts and information. Clothing is, of course, one of the three great human necessities, and meeting that need requires that we engage in a great many other activities. It became clear the exhibit must recognize as a minor theme that people do things with clothes other than simply wear them: They manufacture, merchandise, mend, launder, and recycle them. To the collection we turned, then, searching for approximately forty garments for which sufficient information had been preserved to permit us to develop a sense of both the person inside that second skin and his cultural environment on the outside.

Making the final artifact selections was a time-consuming and difficult task. Some artifacts selected themselves — as we searched through the collections in

**This Dakota Vest** from about 1860 is made and decorated with traditional materials, leather and quills, but is lined with machine-woven cloth. The availability of cheap, factory-made textiles transformed both Indian and white cultures during the nineteenth century.

**This Norwegian dress,** made about 1840, is one of the few immigrant garments in the MHS clothing collection. Work clothes and the clothes of twentieth-century Indians are also rare in the collections.

**A wringer washing machine** like this Sears was familiar in many households. Electric appliances to wash, dry, iron, and sew clothes eased life somewhat for the housewife.
A WINTER flight suit was one of the garments worn by Virginia Mae Hope of Winnebago when she was a Women's Airforce Service Pilot in World War II. To tell her story, the exhibit also includes her flight log books, photographs, and a scrapbook kept while she was stationed in Texas.

MASS production of boots and shoes was a leading Minnesota industry at the end of the nineteenth century when the North Star Shoe Company of Minneapolis produced these Heffelfinger bicycle shoes to supply footgear for the latest leisure-time craze.

As garments, graphics, text, and supporting artifacts were kneaded together, we began to recognize three modes of dealing with objects and concepts emerging from our shared work. Examples of the three approaches are outlined below.

The Overall Focus

Minnesotans have been wearing denim overalls for a century. Once the workday apparel primarily of farmers, blue jeans today are worn by young and old in an ever-widening variety of situations. Yet for their commonness, the number of pairs of jeans and overalls in the collection could be reckoned on one hand, with some fingers left over! We did, however, locate a father's pair of overalls and his son's first pair, worn as they farmed at Lake Park about half a century ago. Because the overalls were a recent donation, we were able to gather additional information to flesh out a sense of the family, strengthening our interpretation of the use of clothing in role-modeling between child and parent.

The young boy's overalls are among the most visually appealing artifacts in the exhibit. They are worn, misshapen, and patched — they have clearly had a very active child inside them — and for that reason they have been used to introduce and set the tone for the exhibit. By pinning down a most typical Minnesota garment to a specific person, place, and time, we hope to encourage many visitors to consider what sorts of "overalls stories" their grandparents may have. Even denimmed teenagers may sense something of the complexities of historical continuity and change as they ponder an artifact which has remained unchanged through time but for which the social meanings continue to change in a slow kaleidoscope. What does the man who began his farming career in that small pair of overalls think of college kids who live in jeans, or businessmen who go to the office dressed in denim leisure suits?

Changing the cloth of their clothes

The exhibit uses the overalls described above to generalize from an accessible, highly specific family situ-
to a discussion of the use of clothing in the socialization of children and as an occupational badge.

Another area of the exhibit deals with as broad a historical topic but does so in more direct (and ponderous) fashion. The major story in Minnesota's nineteenth-century history concerns the confrontation of red and white cultures, each trying to contain or vanquish the other, each trying simultaneously to cope with profound internal cultural transformations. Too many museum exhibits obscure this observation by installing the "Indian exhibit" in one gallery and the "pioneer exhibit" down the hall. The MHS clothing exhibit considers within the same case how both cultures responded to the availability of cheap, factory-made textiles produced by the Industrial Revolution. Both cultures had traditionally organized communal and domestic economies to produce clothing largely within the home. Cheaji cloth available from the local trader or merchant provided both cultures with new kinds of clothing, new ways of decorating their clothes, and a new fabric of daily life. New clothes change the man; in this case, new cloth transformed the cultures.

Ready-mades

Almost all of the clothing in the society's collection was made after the middle of the nineteenth century, by which time ready-made clothes were available in Minnesota for soldiers at Fort Snelling and for farmers and lumbermen living along the eastern rivers. The story of ready-mades is so pervasive that rather than dismiss it quickly in one small case, we decided instead to run the story in its many facets throughout the entire exhibit. A nippy noddy (a hand reel for measuring yarn), a shuttle, and a sewing box suggest the early days of home-woven fabric and homemade clothes. The patenting of the sewing machine in the United States in 1846 made possible the mass availability of ready-mades, and the exhibit offers visitors the opportunity to sit down and try treading out a few stitches themselves. The need to provide army uniforms during the Civil War prompted the early standardization of sizes. Other artifacts in the exhibit offer springboards for considering the decline of the country tailor, the rise of "one-price" stores where no bargaining was necessary, the advent of mail-order "fits" and department store specialty lines, the emergence of home economics sewing classes at school when mothers no longer had to teach their daughters to sew at home, and, finally, Minnesota's celebrated ready-mades, Munsingwear products.

Designing a package for all the above

The exhibit design had to be simple, elegant, unobtrusive, and inexpensive.

With those lofty intentions we began an intensive four-month collaboration with an architectural firm experienced in exhibit design and other historical work. All members of the team shared in evaluating the decisions reviewed above and shared freely and equally in developing final designs.

The first task was to design a simply constructed, readily assembled, re-usable modular exhibit system that will become a major exhibition asset over the long run. The cases must protect the artifacts against theft, provide proper environmental protection for the conservation of the objects, and maximize somehow both the viewing area and the display area.

As the case design developed, we began working with scale models, trying to lay out a floor plan to locate labels and objects in such a way that they might serve in a sense as the connectors in an elaborate visual and intellectual Tinker-toy.

The exhibit has no story — no beginning, middle, or end — so the gallery floor plan does not force the visitor through a fixed sequence of experience. We have tried to keep ideas clustered, to locate text and graphics in such a way that one may follow the thread of an idea in a number of directions.

Three cases entice the visitor entering the gallery, suggesting something of the variety of objects displayed. In the center of the gallery beckon the father-son pairs of overalls, signifying that the historical experience of ordinary people is a key theme; to the left is a case of sewing boxes, contrasting with the overalls in scale and indicating that the exhibit is about more than wearing clothes; to the right is a case on furs and Minnesota's response to its climate, a more traditional social-historical "lesson."

The exhibit elements, we hope, will contribute to a crisp and orderly design. Garments are mounted on neutral body-forms rather than mannequins to eliminate the need for historically accurate and expensive bodies, heads, and hairstyles. Numerous large-scale reproductions of photographs, engravings, and newspapers in the Historical Society's collections help to give a sense of context to the clothes without diminishing their central importance.

This exhibit already looks forward to the next one and recognizes that the MHS clothing collection has to keep growing in order to keep up with the past and present. The exhibit reminds people that their clothes will be important when the history of our own era is told. A blackboard asks for advice on what the Historical Society should be acquiring to represent the last decade of changing fashion.

The exhibit shows that there is history in everyone's closet. Three decades before Roots-fever swept the nation, former MHS Superintendent Theodore C. Blegen called for a commitment to "grass roots history." This exhibit is evidence of the society's continuing interest in the history of the everyday lives of ordinary people — including the clothes off their backs.