

## THE 1924 ANNUAL MEETING OF THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The seventy-fifth annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, on January 14, opened with a session devoted to the fourth annual conference on local history work. The general subject of discussion at this conference, which was held at 10:00 A.M. in the auditorium of the society's building, was "The Museum in Relation to the Community." Among the thirty persons who were present were individuals interested in local history projects in Anoka, Lake Crystal, Mankato, Minneapolis, Morris, Northfield, and St. Paul. The presiding officer at the conference, Mr. Willoughby M. Babcock, Jr., curator of the museum of the Minnesota Historical Society, announced that the object of the discussion was twofold: to bring out the relation of the museum to the community and to make clear the relation of the local museum to the state museum.

The discussion was then opened by Mr. Frank O. Swain of Lake Crystal, who first spoke of the natural interest of people in their past and the vital need of preserving historical records. Every county ought to provide a home in which to house its collection of records. Such a home or museum, he suggested, should be located in the county seat in order that a large proportion of the county's population may be able to come in contact with it. It should be centrally located in the town and should not fail to employ window exhibits and signs to draw the attention of passers-by. The problem of securing funds for such an institution, Mr. Swain indicated, is a serious one. Until official support can be obtained, private gifts must be sought. "Where advisable the museum could be associated with the public library, having the same staff of caretakers and the expenses thus divided." These county

museums, he said, should be affiliated with the state museum, "the latter acting as a clearing house for the exchange of relics, thereby making more complete the variety of relics in the different counties." The counties in turn would present to the state museum objects for its collections. Thus considerable field work could be accomplished through the agency of the local museum. In conclusion, the speaker called attention to the Indian village sites, mounds, and trails in Blue Earth County, which are rich in historical and archeological interest.

The second speaker, Mrs. F. A. Hancock of Morris, chairman of the Stevens County War Records Committee, told of the memorial room or Stevens County War Museum which resulted from the activity of the local war records committee. One room in the Stevens County Memorial Armory, which was erected in 1921, houses the notable collection brought together by this committee. Among the materials there preserved are files of Morris newspapers running back to the first issue, — for August 4, 1876, — of *Frontier Business*, a pioneer newspaper enterprise of the county. Many valuable World War objects are preserved in the museum, and the speaker mentioned a number of these items. Among miscellaneous objects to which she referred was a "bird's eye view of Morris in 1880." Some of the materials in the collection are loans, but, said the speaker, few things, once deposited, are ever withdrawn. An interesting and representative collection has been built up in Morris. "A similar room," said Mrs. Hancock, "might be fitted up in almost any town where there is a room available in courthouse, library, armory or municipal building." A suitable room and funds are not enough, however, to insure success for a county museum. The enterprise needs "a committee willing and able to give sufficient time and in particular two or three persons who have the 'collector's spirit,' who enjoy the game and have the patience to pursue a possible exhibit and get it safely housed."

Mrs. Margaret Hoffman, public librarian of Worthington, who was scheduled to participate in the conference, particularly to tell of the successful assembling of a large collection of historical relics at the time of a recent community pageant in Worthington (see *ante*, p. 319), was unable to be present. Miss Mary V. Carney, instructor in history, Central High School, St. Paul, continued the discussion, taking as her topic the "Value of the Museum for Educational Purposes." She said that although the library is ordinarily a good place for a museum, the school building — if room can be made available in it — is an excellent place for the exhibits because of the immediate use that can there be made of them. The speaker suggested that in the planning of a school museum three units might be taken up: Indian life in Minnesota, pioneer days, and Minnesota at war. She urged that the school children provide a central exhibit for each unit by preparing a model of some particular object or scene of the period, for example, an Indian wigwam, a log cabin, and a scene from camp life. In cases and on walls might be displayed the real historical objects collected in the community. Miss Carney illustrated her main point by showing the audience a model of a spinning wheel made with great care by a boy who chose thus to demonstrate some aspect of pioneer life rather than to write a theme. Such school work could be undertaken even if the community had a county museum. In fact such activities would stimulate the interest of children in both the county and the state museums.

The next speaker, Miss Laura D. Parkinson of Mechanic Arts High School, St. Paul, emphasized the educational value of class visits to the museum. She presented a number of interesting comments from students who had visited the museum of the Minnesota Historical Society and asserted that as a result of museum study the school is socialized, learning vitalized, sympathy broadened, and imagination quickened. A number of suggestions made by students for

increasing the value of museum work were brought out. Among these were the avoidance of the crowding of exhibits, the use of life-size tableau scenes, and representations of the racial elements other than the Indian and the English which have figured in the background of American life.

The chairman indorsed the idea of life-size exhibits and directed attention to the considerable expense which they entail. He said that most museums which have installed such exhibits have met the costs through gifts received from wealthy men.

The meeting was then thrown open for general discussion and Judge Lorin Cray of Mankato told of the work of the Blue Earth County Historical Society, especially of its collection of material. The problem in Blue Earth County is twofold: to get a building or room in which to house the museum, and "to have the place kept up" after the exhibits have been installed. The speaker took up the question as to what kinds of objects should be eliminated from a museum and indicated that, in his opinion, it is of importance to build up comprehensive collections and that "it is better to have the room well filled even if there is a little 'junk' mixed in."

The chairman suggested, in reply to Judge Cray's question about "junk," that objects which possess no intrinsic historical interest but are preserved merely because of some association which gives them a sentimental interest may safely be considered museum "junk." As an example he told of a pebble picked up in a certain region where important historical events occurred. The pebble in question, which was later presented to a museum, obviously possessed historical interest only for the person who picked it up and preserved it. A similar view of museum "junk" was taken by Mrs. Frank M. Reese of Minneapolis, who humorously told of a slab of wood which had been called to her attention as an object of historical interest.

The last speaker was Dr. Solon J. Buck, superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society, who advocated the coördination of the educational facilities of the community. He predicted that eventually community buildings housing the high school, the public library, and the local museum will be common in the smaller towns. To illustrate the tremendous possibilities for assembling material for a local museum, the speaker told of a county centennial celebration in Edwardsville, Illinois, which he attended in 1912. One of the most interesting features of this celebration was a large collection of historical relics brought together at the high school. At least a part of this material should have formed the nucleus of a community museum, but unfortunately there was no one ready to take up the matter and the exhibits were dispersed.

At 12:30 P.M. about sixty-five members and friends of the society attended a luncheon at the St. Paul Athletic Club "to consider plans for the celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the establishment of Minnesota Territory and the founding of the Minnesota Historical Society." After the luncheon was served the superintendent told of the various Minnesota seventy-fifth anniversaries which occur in 1924. St. Paul became the capital of Minnesota in 1849, the year in which the territory was established; the Minnesota Historical Society was founded in that year, and the establishment of the first newspaper printed in Minnesota occurred in the same year. The speaker urged the appropriateness of some celebration of the anniversaries of these events. He then introduced the toastmaster, Judge Cray. After speaking in a humorous vein of the old quarrel over the location of the capital of Minnesota, Judge Cray turned to the subject under consideration and expressed the opinion that one excellent way in which to celebrate the various anniversaries was to establish local historical societies throughout the state, either as independent units or as branches of the state society. The important thing is to

preserve the records of the past, many of which will almost certainly be lost if local societies are not formed. He spoke briefly of the work of the Blue Earth County Historical Society and then called upon Mrs. Ernest J. Stiefel of St. Paul to tell of the plans for a Ramsey County Historical Society.

Mrs. Stiefel told of the movement sponsored by the Fourth District Federation of Women's Clubs for the formation of a local historical society in Ramsey County. She said that it seemed very fitting to form such an organization in the year which marks the seventy-fifth anniversary of the selection of St. Paul as the capital. To illustrate the point that St. Paul has a "history worth preserving" she told a number of interesting historical facts about the city. She then contrasted the situation in Minnesota with that in the state of Massachusetts as regards local historical societies and said that the time has come for communities in Minnesota to follow the example of eastern communities by organizing numerous local historical societies, marking more historic sites, and thus forwarding the historical interests of the state. She said that excellent beginnings had been made in Minnesota and called special attention to the organization of local history activity in St. Louis and Blue Earth counties. The situation in Ramsey County clearly calls for a local history organization and she indicated that such a society would soon be formed.<sup>1</sup>

The toastmaster then introduced Mr. Herbert R. Galt, managing editor of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, who said that this newspaper is greatly interested in the celebration of the important anniversaries of 1924 not only because of its own relation to the events of 1849 but also because it desires to help in forwarding "the dissemination of the proper appreciation of history by the people." The speaker called attention to the fact that the people of the present day can learn a great deal from the past and he scored the view that history is

<sup>1</sup> See *post*, p. 471.

“bunk.” He said that one of the disquieting tendencies of modern life is to disregard the obligation of the present to the past. “There is more interest,” he said, “in contracting debts for the future than in discharging debts of the past.”

Mr. Victor Lawson, editor of the *Willmar Tribune*, who spoke next, first told of the nearly successful movement to establish the capital of Minnesota in Kandiyohi County. He then indorsed the idea of a celebration of the anniversaries of the year. In this connection he expressed the hope that the work of the Minnesota Historical Society would become more widely known throughout the state.

The situation in Renville County was discussed briefly by the next speaker, Mrs. Michael J. Dowling of Olivia. The establishment of Fort Ridgely State Park was mentioned as a notable development in the forwarding of historical interest in the county and the speaker said that the project of a county historical museum, to be housed in a log cabin, was receiving serious consideration.

Dr. Guy Stanton Ford, dean of the graduate school of the University of Minnesota, then spoke briefly on the importance of a definite articulation with the past and contrasted the situation in America with that in Europe, taking as an example land ownership in France where a great many families have held the same piece of land for over a hundred years, some for two hundred years, and a few for even four hundred or five hundred years. The last seventy-five years in Minnesota history have naturally witnessed changes which have proceeded at a rapid rate. Historical work in the Mississippi Valley is of great importance not only because of the remarkable record of achievement in this region, but also because the valley is in the strategic position in the country. The great social and economic policies of the nation will be worked out in the Mississippi Valley. Since the United States occupies a “key position” in the world, the story of the valley will thus have world importance.

Mr. George Martin of Minneapolis, vice-president of the Great Northern Railway Company, then spoke of the value of local history work, calling special attention to the possibilities in Dodge County. He emphasized the importance of collecting historical records "before it is too late," and expressed the view that local societies could do a great deal to preserve "the remains and recollections which might otherwise be lost forever."

The final speaker at the luncheon conference was the Honorable Gideon S. Ives of St. Paul. He first gave an interesting résumé of the rivalry between St. Paul and St. Peter as possible capital sites. He then took up the question of advancing the historical interests of the state and said that the members of the Minnesota Historical Society should make every effort to raise the society's membership from one thousand, where it stood at the beginning of 1923, to two thousand.

About sixty persons attended the afternoon session, which convened at 3:00 P.M. in the auditorium of the Historical Building, with Dr. William W. Folwell, vice president of the society, presiding. Before the three historical papers scheduled for this session were read, the annual reports of the treasurer and the superintendent were presented and the following thirty life members of the society were elected to serve as members of the executive council for the triennium 1924-27: Everett H. Bailey, John M. Bradford, Reverend William Busch, William W. Cutler, Frederic A. Fogg, Mrs. Charles E. Furness, Harold Harris, Frederick G. Ingersoll, Gideon S. Ives, William H. Lightner, James M. McConnell, Victor Robertson, Edward P. Sanborn, Charles Stees, Warren Upham, Olin D. Wheeler, and Edward B. Young of St. Paul; Solon J. Buck, William W. Folwell, Guy S. Ford, Herschel V. Jones, Mrs. James T. Morris, and Lester B. Shippee of Minneapolis; William A. McGonagle and Jed L. Washburn of Duluth; Lorin Cray of Mankato; Burt W. Eaton of Rochester; Victor E. Lawson of Willmar; Olai A. Lende of

Canby; and John R. Swann of Madison. The new executive council, which includes six state officers, *ex officio*, in addition to the members elected, later met in the superintendent's office and elected the following officers of the society for the triennium: William W. Folwell, president; Frederick G. Ingersoll, first vice president; Edward P. Sanborn, second vice president; Solon J. Buck, secretary; and Everett H. Bailey, treasurer.

The first historical paper of the afternoon program, a study of "Some Red River Fur-trade Activities," by Mr. John P. Pritchett, assistant professor of history at Macalester College, St. Paul, is printed in the present number of the BULLETIN. Dr. Clarence W. Rife, associate professor of history at Hamline University, St. Paul, read a paper on "A Fur-trader at Pembina, Norman W. Kittson." He characterized Kittson as an important figure in early Minnesota who in his activities touched the life of the state at many vital spots: as fur-trader and protector of American interests on the northern frontier, as territorial legislator and mayor of St. Paul, as "commodore" of a line of steamboats on the Red River of the North, and as railroad promoter in association with James J. Hill.

Kittson was born at Sorel in Lower Canada in 1814. His grandfather Kittson had served as one of Wolfe's officers at the siege of Quebec and his grandmother, after her husband's untimely death, had married Alexander Henry, the great explorer. At the age of sixteen Norman Kittson became apprenticed to the American Fur Company for three years and started with a band of *voyageurs* for the West. At Mackinac, said Dr. Rife, began an acquaintance with another clerk of the company, Henry H. Sibley, which was destined to ripen into firm friendship and close business association. For several years, however, the two saw little of each other. Meanwhile Sibley became agent at Mendota for the American Fur Company, with supervision over a large area. In 1843 the two formed a partnership, under the company, for trading

on the upper Mississippi and the Red River of the North, and Kittson took charge of the outfit. For eleven years, from 1843 to 1854, Kittson spent most of his time on the frontier. "Making his headquarters at Pembina, and opening up smaller trading posts along the boundary, he proved a thorn in the side of the Hudson's Bay Company, which hitherto had drawn large supplies of furs from American territory." The company attempted to eliminate Kittson, said Dr. Rife, "by sending a rival trader to oppose him, by the use of liquor in the Indian trade, and by raising the price of furs to a ruinously high figure." This keen competition inevitably lowered profits for the rivals. During certain years Kittson operated at a loss, and his profits, taken over a term of years, were far from large. The fur trade was then on the decline.

Dr. Rife then described some of the conditions of the trade. With headquarters so far removed from the base of supply at Mendota Kittson had a formidable transportation problem. In June he loaded his furs, robes, and pemmican in Red River carts and started south. At Traverse des Sioux the cart trip ended and supplies of goods for the ensuing season's trade, brought thither by steamer from Mendota, were loaded for the homeward journey. Sometimes danger was apprehended from hostile Sioux but Kittson was favorably known and respected by the Indians and suffered no interference. The round trip took about two months.

In concluding his paper, Dr. Rife briefly summarized the later stages of Kittson's career. In 1851 Kittson was elected to the territorial council and he served during four sessions. He and the two house members from Pembina traveled to St. Paul in the depth of winter by dog train, making a distance of thirty-five miles a day if the roads were fairly good. They usually had to leave during the session in order to get home before the roads became impassable. Kittson severed active connection with frontier life in 1856 and removed to St. Paul. There various business activities occupied his attention and

in 1858 he was mayor of the city. During the sixties he acted as agent at St. Paul for his old rival, the Hudson's Bay Company, and established the Red River Transportation Company to ply between Breckenridge and Winnipeg. In the late seventies and eighties his association with James J. Hill in railroad enterprises added both to his prestige and to his fortune. He died in 1888.

The last paper of the session was on "Minnesota History as a Background for Fiction," by Mr. Roe Chase, editor of the *Anoka Herald*. Mr. Chase himself was unable to be present and his paper was read for him by Miss Livia Appel, research assistant on the society's staff. The paper contained a strong plea for the use of the Minnesota background in fiction. Attention was drawn to many writers who have written of other states with notable success and the questions were asked: why has no gifted writer of fiction drawn upon the rich materials which Minnesota history and geography afford? Why has no hero of fiction been led in the footsteps of the Minnesota explorers? Why has the epic of the iron mines never been written? "The traditional enmity between the Ojibway and Sioux, the diary of Lawrence Taliaferro, the Calumet Cliffs at Pipestone, the unholy warfare among the fur companies, the building of Fort Snelling, the flour mills, the frightful Indian massacres of 1862, the lore of Rum River, the story of the Pembina trail, the Red River carts and the *bois brulé*, — all these furnish a wonderful background for either pure fiction of the most fascinating sort or for historical romance of even greater and more lasting value." Among other themes and places which should stir the imagination of writers Mr. Chase mentioned the Sibley House at Mendota, the Godfrey House in old St. Anthony, Carver's Cave, the Lake of the Woods, the round tower at Fort Snelling, the trail to Fort Charlotte, and the huts at Pembina. The political history of the state offers material for stories of a type very popular just now. The story of the forests remains unwritten.

That the state offers very attractive possibilities to the writer is undeniable, in Mr. Chase's opinion. To solve the practical problem of stimulating the production of books which have Minnesota backgrounds, Mr. Chase suggested that the Ten Thousand Lakes Association set up a generous annual prize for the best manuscript using the state as a background and that the association cooperate with the publisher of the winning manuscript. The result, he said, would be not only the cultivation of the attractive field of Minnesota but also an honorable and exceedingly effective advertising of the state.

At the conclusion of the afternoon session there was a tour of the museum, conducted by the curator, Mr. Babcock. Much interest was shown in a special exhibit illustrating early conditions in Minnesota, including a "pioneer fireside" and a group of drawings of Indians and Indian life as observed between 1856 and 1860 by the German artist, Franz Hölzlhuber.

The seventy-fifth annual meeting came to a close with the evening session, held in the House Chamber of the State Capitol. The annual address, given by Governor Jacob A. O. Preus on "Knut Nelson" before an audience of about two hundred persons, is printed in full in the February number of the BULLETIN.



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](#).