

EDITOR'S PAGE



RUSSELL W. FRIDLEY

THE NAME of Russell Fridley first appeared in this journal when it was announced in the Winter, 1954, issue that he was "serving as acting director." Less than a year later his name made its initial appearance on the Autumn, 1955, masthead as editor in chief. It has remained there for 166 issues. During the ensuing years Fridley has written 12 articles for these pages; in addition, he has reviewed 26 books and penned seven editorials. His contributions to the magazine go far beyond those indicated by statistics alone, however, as each of the editors with whom he has worked can attest.

After 31 years as director of the society, Fridley has announced his retirement as of December 31, 1986. In the paragraphs that follow, he looks back at the society's last three decades and ahead to the imminent changes of the late 1980s and 1990s. This may be his final editorial as editor in chief, but we are sure his work will appear again in these pages.

AS a new Minnesota History Center moves closer to reality, let me offer a few observations on the long road the Minnesota Historical Society has traveled to this pivotal point in its long career and the challenges that lie immediately ahead.

One of the society's greatest strengths remains its legal nature—a far-seeing gift from its founders in 1849. As Minnesota's oldest institution, it was up and running with nine years of experience when the state came into being in 1858. Its independence of—but heavy reliance upon—state support and identification has stood the test of time. While the society functions much as a state agency, it is insulated to an important degree from the political arena. A membership organization, the historical society also draws support from a statewide constituency dedicated to the cause of state and local history. This dual nature of public and private dimensions continues to energize a durable and strong institution after 137 years of evolution.

The society's growth alongside the territory and state can be seen as cyclical. The first cycle saw the institution launched in 1849 as a quasi-public organization, commingling the public and private bases of support.

The second cycle, helped by a state supreme court ruling in 1879 validating its independent legal status, saw the society intensifying its search for a permanent home after the Civil War, moving toward a full-time staff, building its collections with a strong bent toward antiquarianism and archaeology. The court elaborated

upon the original territorial act creating the historical society as an independent organization carrying out a state purpose. This interpretation has been reaffirmed in subsequent decades.

The third cycle witnessed the society emerging as a force in the cultural and intellectual life of Minnesota. It acquired a new building next to the State Capitol just before World War I and added a professional staff with a progressive view of history. Scholarly and collecting functions retained their primacy, but new programs were designed and deployed to attract a broad public.

The fourth cycle, beginning after World War II, witnessed that broader public coming to the society's sprawling facilities by hundreds of thousands. As the view of history democratized, citizen interest multiplied, the society assumed increased state functions, and state and local history grew as an influence in the lives of Minnesotans. Major projects became more important in shaping programs and delivering services beyond the Twin Cities to individuals and organizations. Interpretation of the story of Minnesota through historic places, new research methods, publications, exhibits, films, workshops, conferences, "living history," and public programs have contributed to carrying the society's services to every part of the state.

SO MUCH for a look backward. As a fifth cycle begins, what new horizons can be seen with the advent of the new Minnesota History Center? This major facility will provide the society with fresh, increased, and varied abilities to serve the people of Minnesota more meaningfully and effectively than ever before. However, the opportunity must be carried through beyond the mere construction, furnishing, and occupation of the building. To succeed, it will require increased funding and citizen support to fulfill its promise as an integrated center at which to experience an incomparable adventure in history.

Other challenges before the MHS, its governing body, staff, friends, and users loom large on these newly appearing horizons. Difficult choices as to what society programs are continued, expanded, curtailed, or eliminated will have to be made. The 1980s are forcing the arranging of priorities. These are not the steady growth years of the 1960s and 1970s. What is likely to be the shape of some of these challenges?

- The leveling-off of growth already has taken a toll of the statewide historic sites system. Hours have been curtailed; a few sites have been closed; two of those closed have been reopened through local initiatives taken by the Brown County Historical Society and the Mayo House Preservation Society in Le Sueur. No new sites have been added to the state system since the James J. Hill House in St. Paul was acquired in 1978. A number of the 31 sites administered by the society have

yet to be developed or remain in an early stage of development. Budget uncertainties show little likelihood of disappearing in the near future. A review of the state historic sites system is overdue. Budget cuts and current levels of funding are not adequate to sustain the program of the 1970s without additional state support. Retrenchment, forced by major budget reductions beginning in 1980, seems short-sighted in view of the increasing appeal of historic places to Minnesotans and visitors to the state.

- As in recent years, more of the society's financial resources must be invested in conserving the nonrenewable resources of the MHS collections themselves. As age and intensive public use threaten to destroy books, manuscripts, newspapers, and museum items, we are in danger of losing the varied and fragile physical forms that perpetuate the state's heritage.

- The MHS needs to exert a leadership role in preservation of buildings, districts, and landscapes. New organizations like the Minnesota Preservation Alliance are welcome allies in this cause. Historic preservation frequently brings history into the marketplace where tradeoffs between historical and new development have to be weighed. The preservation movement possesses many legal tools plus a growing and informed constituency to further its goals. In this arena, history and tourism meet again and promote the economic welfare of those areas endowed with historic values. Historic preservation has broadened the programs of historical societies; it has emerged over the past two decades as a genuine "people's movement," inviting a growing cadre of volunteers to join.

- The society should continue to give a high priority to its outreach programs that nurture county, city, and private historical organizations in all parts of the state. This linkage has been present since the superintendency of Solon J. Buck more than 50 years ago, but as a staffed and organized effort it received strong impetus during the Minnesota Territorial Centennial in 1949 when a county historical society was organized in each of the state's 87 counties. As this statewide network has evolved and matured through MHS field services, grants-in-aid, and cultural resources surveys, the interdependence of the "grass roots" and the state organization has been demonstrated repeatedly. Keeping these ties strong seems to me to be one of the most important tasks for the 1990s at the same time that the state history center emerges in the capitol area.

- The new history center will bring the people of Minnesota new vistas for understanding the story of the state by way of exhibits, public programs, theatrical presentations, and other innovations. It will greatly enhance the institution's ability to interpret and reinterpret the Minnesota story through fresh research and stimulating formats. For the first time in its 137 years,

the society will have an adequate museum facility in which to illuminate Minnesota history through its superb collections. The society's talented staff at last will have the opportunity to deploy the full range of its skills in distilling from these collections the infinite elements that give substance and definition to Minnesota history. The essence of this creative enterprise was articulated long ago by the steamboat inventor, Robert Fulton, a painter-turned-engineer, when he said, "The mechanic should sit down among levers, screws, wedges, wheels, etc. like a poet among the letters of the alphabet, considering them as the exhibition of his thoughts, in which a new arrangement transmits a new Idea to the world."*

• Historical societies should continue to recruit the diversified talents of many professions to their staffs. Historic preservation, ethnic studies, social history, and other projects have served as catalysts to bring together historians, architects, archaeologists, geographers, folklorists, planners, ethnologists, artists, and others in the common pursuit of the past.

*Alice Crary Sutcliffe, *Robert Fulton and the 'Clermont'* (New York: Century Co., 1909), 60.

• The Minnesota Historical Society Press, I am certain, will continue to innovate through its growing list of publications. A noteworthy dimension that recently has been added to the society's publishing arm is the reprinting of classic works about the history of the Upper Midwest, including historical fiction of enduring value.

• The varied collections of the MHS comprise the heart of the institution. Housed in the new history center, they will be centralized and integrated in one location to serve an ever-growing army of researchers each of whom has his or her own historical agenda. Newly found financial resources making possible an expanded staff of librarians, curators, editors, and other professionals will be essential to the success of this large and imaginative effort.

The ultimate test of how successful the MHS will be during the next decade is directly related to the statewide support the Minnesota Historical Society enlists during the exciting times just ahead. The institution's statewide concerns, long history, able staff, dedicated governing board, and friends around the state offer the best insurance for the success this most worthy adventure deserves.





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