

THE INFORMATION BUREAU

A SCHOOL MUSEUM

We are thinking of organizing a museum in our school. Could you send me suggestions as to the way in which a museum can be organized and how and where materials can be gathered?

A School Superintendent

At the outset I should say that the matter should be laid before your teachers and a clear statement of the purpose of organizing such a museum made. Presumably you will want to use your museum collection as an adjunct to the school work and accordingly material which will assist in the geography, history, and domestic science courses should be sought. Your manual training classes could be interested in making models if it is impossible to get originals of pioneer household furniture and other objects, and they might also make cases to contain the material as it is collected. Old-fashioned costumes always appeal to girls in the domestic science classes and they could readily be induced to conduct searches in their attics for such material. A costume collection will give teachers a splendid opportunity for studying with their classes the old fabrics and the needlework done on the pieces.

After the interest of the school has been thoroughly aroused the interest of the parents and of the general public should be excited by newspaper stories,— for your local newspaper editor will without doubt help matters along by giving liberally of his news space, — a meeting or two, and then perhaps a loan exhibit held at the school, at the library, or at one of the churches. Old settlers in the community and their descendants will doubtless take an interest in having their objects of historical interest preserved and their services thus recognized.

In selecting a place in which to house permanently your museum collection the element of safety from fire and theft

should be given large consideration, for it will be one of your strong talking points in asking people for donations. Good lighting for the displays — from windows, skylights, or electric lights — should also be available.

One of the important elements in the establishment and maintenance of a museum, whether school or public, is the selection of some person who possesses the collecting instinct and good judgment and taste to select material and to arrange that which is received. There is always danger of loading up on relics and curios, such as leaves, pebbles, and bits of wood from various places, which may mean a good deal to the person securing them but which have no intrinsic interest. The displays as arranged should not be mere masses of objects laid out hit-or-miss as "Presented by Mr. So and So." Instead, definite attempts should be made to explain something by means of the objects. An attempt should be made almost from the beginning to classify your material, so that stuffed birds, insects, geological specimens, pioneer household material, archeological specimens, and Indian relics may be grouped by themselves and not muddled together. The records of accessions, whether kept on cards or in a book, should be as complete as possible, so that all available information about a piece may be permanently on file, and an accession or record number referring to this information should be plainly marked on each specimen in such a manner that it will not come off and leave the specimen in later years unidentified. The record should show what the specimen is, its locality, its date, and other available information about it, together with the name and the address of the donor and the date when the object was received. Specimens which might easily be carried off by unscrupulous persons should be displayed under glass in cases, if possible, or else should be placed out of reach.

If you will write to the secretary of the American Association of Museums, 2 West Forty-sixth Street, New York City, I am sure that much helpful information and literature will

be forthcoming. I shall be glad to keep in touch with you and to assist you in every way I can.

WILLOUGHBY M. BABCOCK

Curator of the Museum, Minnesota Historical Society

Though you may not have had manuscripts in mind when you inquired about material for your proposed school museum, I am going to take the liberty of calling to your attention the importance of including them in your scheme.

Very shortly after your pupils begin to inquire of their relatives and friends for Indian objects, pioneer household articles, and other strictly museum material, you will almost certainly be informed that Mr. So and So has an old diary kept in the Civil War, or a few letters written by early settlers and describing the region, or a fur-trader's account books, or other material for American and Minnesota history. Nothing could be better calculated to stimulate interest in history than these papers, for they bring to the student the realization that history is something more than a list of names and dates to be memorized. How can a boy think of the Sioux Massacre as a mere "historical event" when he holds in his hands the diary kept by his grandfather describing day by day the tragedies and heroisms of that eventful summer in Minnesota? One can hardly appreciate, I think, the difference that a few such manuscripts, wisely used, will create in the history classes. Besides making historical personages real, living men and women, they will create a "feeling for the sources," which is fundamental in acquiring an historical point of view.

Of course one should not fail to mention that papers of this kind are of value for other than history classes. Take, for example, the highly useful lesson that can be taught respecting legible handwriting; or the fine pieces of description that letters and diaries contain, from which classes in composition can get material.

I am convinced, however, that letters, diaries, account books, and similar material are too valuable for state and national history to be left permanently anywhere but in the possession of the state historical society, of a county historical society, or of some other depository where persons trained in the treatment and use of manuscripts can care for them and where they will be safe from the ravages of fire, mice, theft, and the other numerous dangers that beset these frail but invaluable records of our past as community, state, or nation. The Minnesota Historical Society would always be willing to cooperate with you by preserving in its fireproof building any papers you might discover, giving your museum the credit for collecting them. Copies made for your collection would preserve the subject matter in your museum in more easily accessible form than the documents themselves; and, having no original papers left by preceding classes, each class would have the inspiration for gathering new manuscripts.

I might mention here the fact that mere information regarding manuscripts is eagerly welcomed by the Minnesota Historical Society. With the information received from a teacher in Chatfield, who in turn obtained the facts while encouraging her history class to gather manuscripts, this society succeeded in 1923 in getting a file of valuable papers relating to the political and military history of the state. Your classes undoubtedly could render similar services to this society and, at the same time, learn much about prominent men and women of their community's past.

We shall watch with much interest the organizing of your museum and the results of your pupil's collecting activities. May success be your reward.

GRACE LEE NUTE

Curator of Manuscripts, Minnesota Historical Society



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