

GETTING A COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY STARTED ¹

In the phrasing of this topic it is correctly assumed that county historical societies should be started. On this point there is no dispute, as there is no denial that such societies once started should be kept going. It is agreed that counties should preserve their local history, that to do so is a mark of intelligence, that not to do so indicates backwardness. Many people are rushing headlong into present-day activities with eyes only to the future. It is proper that they should keep records and think of and reflect upon the past in order that a balance be preserved. Who never studies nor reflects on the past is only half a man and not the better half. Intelligence looks in all directions.

Local history work of necessity must be county history work, because the county is the unit of government and a sort of social unit. The average man looks to his county to protect his life and property, to furnish local police protection, and to deal with his law business, his property, schools and the like. It is true that in many things the city, when big enough, is a sort of county. For practical purposes it may be included in the area subject to a county historical society. Or a large city may have a society of its own. County historical societies are natural growths and do not awaken hostility. At the same time, their existence is no bar whatever to other historical societies in the same jurisdiction which may be auxiliary to them.

It has been suggested that the county is not always a logical unit for historical work because, going back a few years, it is found that the history of its area is common to other counties.

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It might be noted too, that going back further, its history is common to a vast unoccupied territory, and further again, common to a continent. What of it? This objection need not disturb. It means only that historical work in the earlier reaches of a county's history might be duplicated by different and adjoining counties. This would not matter much. The knowledge of early days is usually limited and the story is brief. That the early history of a great region before its counties were organized is written and reviewed by a number of county societies does not make it less valuable. This may develop new aspects and disturb at times conventional error. A few chapters bring the student to the period when a county's history is all its own.

Thus it is agreed that counties should have their historical societies. Aside from the question of continuity, counties should be the unit of organization because the people of a county have common institutions, know one another, are closely associated, have a local patriotism and politics, and because sources of supply and support are easy to organize under county auspices. The county is an historical center because it is a legal and social center. Narrowing the point down, the county becomes recognized as the most important local historical unit, which it is in fact.

County societies have a great field, which may only be summarized here. They should trace county history as far back as they can. They should not fail to find out what there is to be found out about county geology, especially if this geologic history has items of special interest. The facts about the flora and fauna of the region should be recorded. The coming of the pioneers and their racial origin, the opening of farms, and the organization of towns, school districts, and cities are important. The work of all who took part in county organizing and upbuilding should be noted. Records should be preserved of the quiet and undramatic development of the community as well as of stirring events such as wars, uprisings, conflagrations, and forest or prairie fires. A chronology

of county history should be prepared, and a sketch of the Indian life of the area. Finally, to crown all, a system of recording not only the past but also the present doings of the people should be developed.

Since it is manifest that there should be county historical societies, let us consider how they should be started. It may be noted, to begin with, that there are no fixed rules to follow, although the general principles underlying the work are the same everywhere. In starting a society, the field it is to cover, the area and population it is to study, and the field of research available to it should be carefully considered. It is obvious that a local society for a populous county of much wealth may be on a more pretentious scale with greater outlay and a more specialized and expensive organization than a county society for a farming community. Yet the latter organization is as essential as the former and its labors may be and often are as valuable.

There is no money, no financial profit to be made in the work. That should be kept in mind. It must be a labor of love. Nevertheless there must be some compensation, small but certain, for the person who takes up the burden of keeping the studies on foot and there must be provision for necessary clerical assistance.

It is very easy to start. The trouble is to keep going. In this state the superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society will undoubtedly be glad to coöperate with some resident or group of residents of a county planning a society. The local group or individual will then issue invitations to those interested and also make a public announcement in the newspapers with a general invitation to the people of the county to aid in organizing. The meeting is held and the society is organized with a constitution provided and prepared in advance by the state society or with this constitution modified to fit local conditions. The society should be affiliated with the state society. This means merely that the state and county societies work in unison and exchange ideas. The state society is

always anxious and willing to serve the county society. The officers of the local organization are always welcome at state headquarters and state officers are equally welcome in the offices of the county society. The state society, from its vast collection of documents, is often able to throw light on local history. Its aid is always available. As to the man or woman intrusted with the work of organization in the county, the state society knows what he needs. Such a person must be disinterested, must love the work, must be willing to labor at it, and above everything must be proud of it. The idea of an historical democracy need not enter. The historian deals with truths and holds no brief for any party whatever.

The local society must have an executive with very full powers, subject to a board of governors, of which he is one, and to an annual election. The executive should be the president in all county societies. In state societies the practice may be different because the organization is different. But the combination of the authority of the president and the executive works well in most places smaller than the great centers. To be sure this is not essential. The secretary may be the executive where this is more judicious.

The fee for membership should be small and all applications for membership should be passed upon by the executive. He should control the clerical help and also should have the power to call historical meetings and to arrange for them in all details. To avoid any misunderstanding the powers of the executive should be defined, and though very broad, they should be subject to the absolute control of the board of governors, which in turn should be subject to the control of the members at the annual or semiannual meetings.

It is clear that annual dues paid by the less than a hundred people who are likely to join a county society do not go very far. But even such a sum, if the society is of the simplest form and holds but one meeting a year, does very well indeed. As the society is a county organization, county authorities are usually glad to give it a room in the courthouse without charge.

If there is no room with a fireproof vault available, a part of the vault of some county officer may be set aside for the society in order that its records and collections of value may be safely preserved. Often a county officer interested in and acquainted with county history will be the executive.

Even historians must eat and drink and wear clothes, but it is not too much to say that they do not regard the making of money as the only thing. After the county society is started, perhaps some member will endow it. Perhaps legal authority can be found or created under which the county may donate a little each year to the support of the society. It should do so. But it would be a mistake to make the work burdensome to the taxpaying public, or to make the position of its leader desirable for the money there appears to be in it. The service of the society should be absolutely undesirable as a source of revenue and its workers, aside from those purely clerical, should labor because they love the work and find other than financial compensation in it. Even clerical workers should be chosen because of their interest in history.

There should be some one on duty during all business hours at the headquarters of the society. There must be a constantly progressing, serious study of county history. The organization must be awake and active from month to month. With the local dues, a little county help, possible donations, and low expense accounts much will be accomplished. The executive, who must be a lover of local annals, may be regularly in the public or library service, and if so, very little financial inducement may be needed to enlist his services for the county historical society.

In organization work, as in all things, the garment must be cut according to the cloth. If resources are abundant, the plans may be broad; if limited, the plans will be less ambitious but not necessarily inferior. An important thing is to get the minds of those interested adjusted to the work. They should understand that it is not a hot pancake business; that history was not made in a day and cannot be collected in a day; and,

moreover, that history, like a diamond, has different facets, that it has different paths of approach, that it is immensely tolerant, and that all things come within its scope.

In these days people overflowing with energy plan to do and to finish work undertaken. They want an early end. But history, which, considered as a person, is always young, strong, and eternal, simply will not be finished. History then is to be studied, enjoyed, digested, and recorded. It is not to be hurried as it is not to be slothful.

If one approaches the subject in this frame of mind in any community whatever, however small or apparently unimportant or lacking in annals, wonderful things may be done. What a lot of history is really available in the grayest Minnesota township. Whence the inhabitants? What seas did they cross? Why? What did they do upon arrival? Who led them, and who broke the first land? What were their feelings, emotions, and beliefs? What was the origin of the names of all natural objects and of the towns or villages? What is the present situation of the township? What relation does the place bear to the places adjoining and to the outside world? If these and similar questions are studied and answered scrupulously, it will be seen at once that in the history of this gray township matters of deep interest are involved. It is the history of life as it is. Thus the county society can set its friends at work to dig up the story of their hamlets and farms. The people of a locality should be taught, and be big enough to learn, that this is real history, a type of history not often written at all and seldom well written because it is so difficult and laborious. Many writers prefer to gesticulate and generalize rather than descend to simple facts.

The new society can be well started by planning to hold from one to three meetings each year at different points in the county. At this place it is well enough to say that the interested should know that it is not wise to undertake too much, that the society does not propose a conflagration but only a gentle fire to warm up cold embers and to keep on burning

for all time. County meetings should always have papers on matters of local interest and concern.

But it is said that people will not take an interest in mere historical meetings. There is no food, no dancing, no "jazz," no "movie." No matter about that. A few are sure to come, and if the affair is well planned and the interest of the conservative societies obtained, many are likely to appear. Moreover, great crowds or even large crowds are not needed nor essential, perhaps not even desirable. The important thing is to have those present who love the work and who will give it the aid of study, work, or money. Papers read at the meetings should be carefully preserved. One may always rely on the sympathetic interest of the newspaper fraternity. Most newspaper writers love history and approve of historical students. Somehow they get weary of human dynamos that make tremendous noise and pretend to turn the world over in a day. The news gatherer sees that this motion is really farcical, a pretense that gets the agitator nowhere. The newspapers will feature the meetings and publish the historical papers presented.

But the meetings are not the only work of a county society. They stimulate interest and they are a means of getting historical papers prepared. So far so good. To start right, there are many splendid things to plan and to think of. One of these which is really of prime importance is the planning of a system of historical bookkeeping for the county. It should be by quadruple entry. One entry is devoted to a history of county notables, names arranged in alphabetical order. There is no rigid rule about this. Almost any one can have a folder of material, but do not worry, the thing never really gets out of proportion. The genuine characters in local history always come to the surface. Then there should be entries by years, a chronological record. Thus, each year has its annals. Events of note happening in every year are noted in that year's folder. The third division treats of various events and topics, wars, Indians, city building, mines, first settlements, legends.

riots, catastrophes, societies, churches, and the like. The history of each is grouped in a separate folder. The fourth group of entries deals with accessions. Under this heading all valuable books, documents, papers, and gifts of importance are entered in numerical order. This accession group has a double index; one giving the names of the writers or donors alphabetically arranged, and the other merely a list of accession numbers with the subject of the accession following the number. This index could be elaborated so as to be more useful.

Thus the bookkeeping covers persons, times, events, and the recording of them. It recognizes the double meaning of the word history: one, the events that took place; the other, the record of the story of the past. This bookkeeping may be easily kept up to date by giving it a little attention each day. It is naturally cross-indexed so that each group or form of entry leads into the other. This bookkeeping record may be kept in steel fire-proof cases.

No pains should be spared to interest the schools in local historical work. While it is very true that the elderly love history, it is a fact not sufficiently recognized that the young love it with great fervor. The Minnesota Historical Society is laboring to coördinate its work in proper and appropriate degree with the work of the schools. The students in the high schools and in the grades write many essays. Why not have them write about the origin of their community, about the tragedies of life in their own land when it was begun, about the wars in which the county was involved, about the pioneers, often their own ancestors? This should be a regular not a spasmodic work. It constitutes no addition whatever to the school program. It fits in. Teachers labor incessantly to find subjects for essays. Let the young then write of home history, a thing they know about and in which they are interested.

Museum work develops quite naturally along with the other activities of a county society. It has numerous phases and methods. The space devoted to it depends on the extent of the accessions. At present the movement in this direction is

very pronounced. Museum work, however, is at most merely an adjunct or a handmaid of historical work. Perhaps a better way to put it is to say that it is a phase or a part of it.

People start many organizations to uplift themselves and society in general, with no thought of mere money profit. They start churches, lodges, schools, charities, and the like not only for the good they should and may do, but also for the pleasure derived from carrying on such labors. Such work is done for humanity's sake and also for personal pleasure, that sort of pleasure arising from well doing, a warm and glowing satisfaction. Students of local history feel both of these impulses. Their work broadens and gives pleasure. The vision of the historian reaches into the past and he tells the world what he sees. The historian who sees the past clearly has not much trouble in enjoying the present and conjuring up the future. He is a well-rounded character.

It is evident that any community is better off with an historical society than without one. The society is a badge of culture, a mark of growth. There cannot be too many such societies. They are easy to start. The state historical society may well promote the movement for the establishment of local historical societies in the various counties of the state. The county organizations will grow strong and develop with a little loving care.

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