

THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY IN 1927¹

Some years ago a distinguished scholar called attention to the desirability of "humanizing knowledge" — making the results of scientific investigation available in such form that they may be understood, or at least appreciated, by intelligent people not specialists in the particular fields, and also arousing their interest in such things. This, he believes, is necessary if the great advances in knowledge of the last half century are to have their full effect in promoting human progress. Without neglecting the fundamental work of collecting, preserving, and making available historical materials and promoting investigations that may add to the sum of historical knowledge, the Minnesota Historical Society has also concerned itself with the humanizing of history, and in this report special attention will be given to this phase of its activities.

The annual meeting of the society in January and the state historical convention held under its auspices in June were among its most effective means of humanizing history. Papers read at these meetings by trained scholars and competent amateurs, whether contributions to knowledge or reinterpretations, were presented in popular form; considerable attention was devoted to the promotion of sound local history work; and the unusually large attendance at both meetings indicates that considerable interest in history was aroused among the people of Minnesota. The influence was carried still farther through extensive newspaper publicity and the publication of accounts of the meetings and most of the papers in the society's magazine. Plans are now under consideration for the next

¹ Read at the annual meeting of the society on January 9, 1928. *Ed.*

summer meeting, and suggestions, especially as to place, will be welcomed.

Another indication of growing interest in history is the continued increase in the membership of the society. The number of active members enrolled during 1927 was 108, somewhat less than in 1926, and the total active membership at the end of the year was 1,470, a net increase of 47. Deaths of active members numbered 33 and 33 were dropped for nonpayment of dues, but 5 who had previously been dropped were reinstated. It is gratifying to note that the number of those who dropped out in 1927 was smaller than in any previous year since 1922 — an indication that the society is strengthening its hold on the interest of its members. The total membership, including 8 honorary, 53 corresponding, and 10 institutional members, is 1,541; and adding the 172 Minnesota schools and libraries that subscribe to the society's publications makes a total of 1,713 members and subscribers.

In membership the society ranks near the top among state historical societies, but there must be hundreds if not thousands of other people in the state who would appreciate the privileges of membership if the matter could be brought effectively to their attention. A new *Roll of Members*, arranged by counties, which has just been published, will enable present members to ascertain who of their acquaintances are not now enrolled, and it is believed that they will cooperate effectively in a membership campaign soon to be launched. Neither the dues of annual members nor the interest on life membership fees is enough, however, to pay the cost of printing the publications that are sent to each member. It may be necessary before long to raise the dues or to limit the publications distributed to members without charge; at any rate, it is hoped that such of the present life members as feel that they can afford to will become contributing-life members paying five dollars or more a year, or patrons contributing fifty dollars or more annually.

The society's publications are undoubtedly one of its most effective means of humanizing history. The four issues of its magazine, MINNESOTA HISTORY, for the year, make, with the index, a volume of 491 pages. Besides accounts of the meetings, documents, translations, reviews, and notes, the volume contains nine major articles, most of them by trained scholars, but all so written as to have an appeal to the general reader. Favorable comments upon the magazine have been received during the year from a number of the most distinguished historical scholars in the country, and its popular interest is attested by the fact that newspapers have drawn upon it frequently for stories and have reprinted several of the articles in full. One article, entitled "Monte Cassino, Metten, and Minnesota," by Dr. August C. Krey of the University of Minnesota, was reprinted in pamphlet form by St. John's University.

A larger public than that served by the magazine is probably reached by means of the monthly clip sheet, *Minnesota Historical News*, which is sent to more than three hundred Minnesota newspapers. This service is much appreciated by the papers, the stories are extensively printed and read, and they undoubtedly help to arouse and sustain popular interest in history and in the society. Another publication, the *Check List of Minnesota Public Documents*, which is now issued quarterly, serves the practical purpose of keeping librarians and others who may be interested, informed of all the current publications of the state and its institutions. A cumulation of this check list for the fiscal biennium 1923-25 was brought out during the year as a pamphlet of forty pages, and it is expected that other cumulations will be published in the future. The only other publication of the society in 1927 was the *Roll of Members*, previously mentioned, which was issued as number 3 of the *Handbook Series*. It is hoped that a new edition of the general *Handbook* of the society may appear in the near future, and plans have been made for a number of handbooks dealing with special activities.

On the more extensive publication projects of the society, progress can be reported, although no volume has appeared during the year. Dr. Folwell is still making additions to the manuscript for the fourth and last volume of his history of the state and these are being edited about as rapidly as they are received. The first volume of the two-volume general history of Minnesota in the World War will be ready for the printer in a month or two and considerable progress has been made on the second volume. This work is being written by Mr. Franklin F. Holbrook and Miss Livia Appel, who comprise the staff of the war records division. Two other volumes, a collection of documents on Indian missions in Minnesota, edited by Dr. Grace L. Nute, the curator of manuscripts, and a bibliography of Minnesota newspapers and inventory of existing files, compiled by the superintendent and Mr. Bryce E. Lehman, with the assistance of grants from the graduate school of the University of Minnesota, will be ready as soon as funds are available for their publication.

The number of books, pamphlets, and bound volumes of newspapers added to the library in 1927 was 2,569, a slight increase over 1926. The gifts — including newspapers, which are contributed by the publishers but bound by the society, and United States documents, which are technically on deposit — made up fifty-two per cent of the total. Thirty-nine per cent were purchased, and the remaining nine per cent came in by exchange with other institutions. The accessions of the year bring the estimated strength of the library to 164,000. The additions to the manuscript collection were unusually numerous, extensive, and important, the bulk of them being photostatic copies or transcripts of Minnesota material in other depositories. Especially notable are the early diaries of Governor Ramsey, about seven hundred sheets of population schedules of the census of 1860, filling gaps in the incomplete set in the state archives, about the same number of reproductions of manuscript maps in French archives, and large addi-

tions of material relating to the fur trade, Indian missions, and the Sioux War. In the museum there have been considerable additions to the domestic life, pioneer, military, archeological, and numismatic collections; and the picture collection has been notably enriched by the purchase of 6,700 photographs, negatives, and lantern slides from the estate of the late Edward A. Bromley. Notes on the more important additions to the society's collections of books, pamphlets, newspapers, manuscripts, pictures, and museum articles are published regularly in the magazine.

The rearrangement of the library necessitated by the construction of an additional level of the bookstacks has been completed. The top level, which is cut off from the rest of the stacks by gratings with locked doors, is now devoted principally to manuscripts and archives; the level below that contains United States documents and other uncatalogued material; and the three lower levels, which are nearest to the reading room, house the catalogued and most used part of the library. It proved impossible to make space in the stacks for the duplicates awaiting disposition and they are still on wooden shelving at the bottom of the unfinished stack space. Another level of the bookstack should be constructed in the near future, and additional shelving for newspapers will soon be essential. Part of the new stack level has been designed for the storage of maps, boxes and folders suitable for flat filing have been obtained, and a beginning has been made in classifying and arranging the extensive and invaluable map collection. Several new exhibition cases, additional vertical files for pictures and lantern slides, and a mezzanine floor in one of the storage closets have greatly facilitated the care of the museum collections.

Exceptional progress has been made during the year in the cataloguing of the library. The number of books and pamphlets catalogued, 2,855, exceeded the accessions for the year, exclusive of newspapers and United States documents, which

are not regularly catalogued, by 860, thus indicating that real progress is being made upon the uncatalogued accumulations of the past. These are so large, however, that at the present rate it will be twenty years before they are all catalogued, and in addition large sections of the library are greatly in need of reclassification and recataloguing to make them fully available. The picture collection, with the exception of part of the Bromley pictures, is all catalogued, and progress has been made on a catalogue of museum specimens. The manuscript division has nearly completed an inventory of the personal papers, which make up the bulk of the manuscripts exclusive of archives. A start was made during the year on a dictionary catalogue of manuscripts, but it soon became evident that this would require the services of a trained cataloguer for a considerable period, and, as no funds for such an assistant were available, the work was suspended. All current accessions of manuscripts have been arranged and filed as received; the sorting of the Knute Nelson Papers, which fill three hundred filing boxes, was completed; and progress was made in the arrangement of the great collection of land office papers. The shifting of the manuscripts and archives to the top level of the bookstack made possible a rearrangement of the entire collection on a systematic plan.

Although the number of readers registered in the main library was larger than in 1926, the number of books served to them—about forty thousand—was several thousand less than for the preceding year. The explanation, in part at least, seems to be that, because of the insufficiency of the reference staff, more readers were allowed access to the stacks, and no record can be made of the books they use. A large increase was noted in the use of books in the field of Minnesota history. The growing recognition of the importance of the library is evidenced by the fact that it was used during the year by people from nineteen states and one foreign country, some of whom came to St. Paul specifically for that purpose. The

number of users of manuscripts increased from 244 in 1926 to 333 in 1927, and the number of visitors to the museum — about forty thousand — was larger than for previous years.

Not all the people who want information that the society is in a position to furnish can come to the building, and information on all sorts of subjects is supplied by mail or telephone. Such of these inquiries as call for special historical knowledge or investigation are assigned to the members of the staff best equipped to handle them and their replies are put in the form of brief reports. The number of such reports increased from 113 in 1926 to 122 in 1927, exclusive of duplicates of previous reports, which can sometimes be made to serve. Copies of all the reports, which now total 610, are preserved and indexed, and the file of them is a valuable compact repository of reference information relating primarily to Minnesota history.

Probably one of the most effective means of humanizing history employed by the society is the informal talks or lectures given by members of the staff, usually on topics in Minnesota history, before clubs, local historical societies, classes, and meetings and gatherings of all sorts. About seventy such talks were given in 1927 by four members of the staff; and, except in a very few cases, no compensation was received. The illustrated talks given by Mr. Babcock to classes brought to the museum for the purpose serve to promote an interest in history on the part of the younger generation. Four of the lectures, on broad aspects of the state's history, were given in the building as a series under the auspices of the society, and the attendance averaged nearly a hundred. The four lectures were repeated at the summer session of the University of Minnesota.

Another phase of the society's efforts to humanize history consists of the promotion of local history activities in the state. Mention has already been made of the attention given to this at the annual and summer meetings, but in addition members of the staff are frequently in correspondence with local history

leaders in various parts of the state, aiding them in their work, if it is under way, or helping them to get it started. Three new county historical societies were organized during the year — in Roseau, Otter Tail, and Crow Wing counties — making a total of eleven in the state. The activities of these societies are regularly reported in *MINNESOTA HISTORY*, and several of them are affiliated with the state society through institutional membership and report annually to it.

The society continues its efforts to increase and improve the teaching of Minnesota history in the schools. A detailed syllabus for the history of the state, compiled by Dr. Theodore C. Blegen, is now available in mimeographed form; and aid of one form or another is rendered frequently to teachers of the subject throughout the state. Courses in Minnesota history are now given in Hamline University, Macalester College, and the University of Minnesota, and the students in these courses make extensive use of the resources of the society.

The success of the society's work during the past year has been due very largely to the experience, efficiency, and enthusiasm of the assistant superintendent and the heads of the various divisions and departments. Fortunately there have been no resignations in any of these positions, and the few vacancies that occurred in minor positions were promptly filled with competent people. The professional quality of a number of the members of the staff is indicated by their activities outside the regular work of the society — activities that keep them and the society in touch with the larger world of scholarship.

The competence of Dr. Blegen in his professional work has recently been attested by his appointment to a position in the department of history at the University of Minnesota, and he continues to edit the publications of the Norwegian-American Historical Association, three volumes of which have appeared during the year. He has also written two biographies for the "Dictionary of American Biography" and has written articles and edited documents for a number of historical magazines.

Dr. Nute has been appointed to a part-time position in the department of history at Hamline University, where she is teaching a course in Minnesota history. An article by her on "The Papers of the American Fur Company" has been published in the *American Historical Review*, and she has written reviews of books for the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*. She took advantage of a vacation in the East to visit depositories of manuscripts in Quebec, New York, and Washington, and search them for material of Minnesota interest.

Mr. Willoughby M. Babcock, curator of the museum, served as vice president of the Mid-west Museums Conference and had charge of arrangements and the program for a meeting of the organization held in St. Paul and Minneapolis in November. He spent a week in July with a field expedition of the Milwaukee Public Museum, exploring Indian mounds in Wisconsin. He attended the Mississippi Valley Historical Association meeting at New Orleans and the American Historical Association meeting at Washington at his own expense; and, also at his own expense, made a trip in December to Des Moines, Topeka, and St. Louis, for the purpose of locating material for the society and for use in his work on a doctoral dissertation on the administration of Indian affairs in Minnesota. He has been given a leave of absence for four or five months from February 1, 1928, to enable him to complete this dissertation.

Members of the library staff have coöperated in the work of the Minnesota and Twin City library associations and have attended meetings of the American Library Association. Mr. Jacob Hodnefield, head of the accessions department of the library, and Mr. Roy W. Swanson, newspaper assistant, working outside of hours, have translated and edited material for publication in the society's magazine. The superintendent continues to do half-time teaching at the University of Minnesota and during the past year he served as chairman of the American Historical Association's committee on nominations

and as a member of its committees on endowment and on bibliography. In the last capacity he has charge of the compilation of a bibliography of American travel.

The appropriations made by the last legislature for the regular activities of the society during the biennium that began last July amount to \$47,400 a year. The increase of \$400 over previous appropriations made possible a few small salary increases, but the sum requested for a much needed head of the reference department was not granted and the service in the reading room will remain inadequate for another biennium at least. A special appropriation of \$8,000 a year for two years was made for the completion and publication of the World War history. This is an increase of \$2,000 a year over the appropriation for war history work by the previous legislature and is the smallest sum with which the work can be adequately done.

The income of the society from dues, except life membership fees, which are invested, and from the proceeds of its permanent fund and miscellaneous sources, amounting in all to about eleven thousand dollars, is regularly expended, and furnishes a much need supplement to the state appropriation. This sum has increased very little in recent years, but the hope is entertained that, as Minnesota grows older, some of her people of wealth and culture will make liberal donations or bequests to aid the Minnesota Historical Society in promoting the scientific study of the past and in humanizing history.

SOLON J. BUCK

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL



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](#).