

STATE HISTORICAL AGENCIES AND THE PUBLIC¹

State historical agencies in recent years have been wooing the public with rare ardour. In some cases — notably in Missouri² — they have embarked upon the enterprise with set purpose and have laid their plans and carried through their campaigns with an altogether unromantic precision; and in others the courtship has progressed without deep design from stage to stage toward an entangling alliance. It is possible that to some scholars the popularizing of history is yet viewed with suspicion as a shibboleth of the passing hour. To most administrators of state historical work, however, it is now accepted as a wholly respectable objective, closely allied with the more fundamental purposes of collecting, making accessible, and publishing source materials, of bringing out historical studies, and of serving the needs of scholars.

In Dr. Buck's presidential address before the Mississippi Valley Historical Association in 1923 much emphasis was placed upon the need of coöperation among scholars in American historical work, not only in the search for and the calendaring of source materials and in documentary publication but also in the exchange and adaptation of ideas concerning the carrying of the "gospel of salvation through a knowledge of the past to all who are capable of receiving it."³ From this point of view it may be useful to note some of the current practices of historical agencies in carrying state history to the public and perchance to suggest a few possibilities for improvement.

¹ A paper read at the twenty-first annual meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association at Des Moines, Iowa, on April 26, 1928.

² See Floyd C. Shoemaker, "Popularizing State History," in the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, *Proceedings*, 10:433-439 (1918-21).

³ Solon J. Buck, "The Progress and Possibilities of Mississippi Valley History," in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 10:14 (June, 1923).

Back of the effort are immediate practical objectives, but workers in the field are not unmindful of larger, if less tangible, gains toward which they are moving. Obviously it is desired "to spread a knowledge of and interest in state and local history among the largest possible number of people."⁴ The practical results of such a spread may be seen in the rapidly increasing membership of state societies; in the growth of appreciation among public officials and legislators of the value of the work of such societies and consequently in more adequate financial support; in the organization and increased activity of local historical societies; in the more rapid building up of manuscript collections, historical libraries, and museums, both state and local; in the stimulation of the marking of historic sites and the erection of historical monuments; in increased attention to the teaching of state history; in the increase in quantity and not infrequently the improvement in quality of historical contributions to newspapers and magazines. To name such gains is sufficient to indicate their desirability; they are hailed with joy by historical society officials, though the increase in the burden of administration doubtless shortens their lives. When one turns to the contribution that a knowledge of state and local history makes to the enjoyment of individual life, one touches a gain that defies a measuring stick, but few will deny that the extension of such a gain to the largest possible number of people is desirable. Nor can it be doubted that progress in this direction leads not only to individual but also to community and state betterment. It is possible that the upshot of this popularizing of interest in a given state will be the creation of a wholesome state historical consciousness. And one may believe that this will have some relation to a more intelligent citizenship if there is a sound basis for the view that a knowledge of historical backgrounds contributes to one's grasp of present conditions and tendencies.

⁴ Benjamin F. Shambaugh to the author, April 11, 1928.

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that popularization of history should always be based upon the truth. It is probably Utopian to expect a large proportion of the population to become historical-minded, and yet if such a spirit of criticism and candor is desirable in the individual, let no one scoff at honest attempts to increase it in the aggregate. It is unnecessary to consider here the question of the general value of local historical study, though it may not be amiss to note that a scholarly reviewer has suggested that a recent volume in mid-western local history has some claim to being considered "the best history of civilization yet offered to the American public."⁵ If so general a value can be placed upon investigation in this field, the advantage of popularizing local history would seem to be apparent.⁶

The state historical magazines appear to be the most effective agents in making the work of the state societies known and appreciated and in forwarding the cause of state history. The more substantial publications, however, not only have won prestige among scholars but also have impressed upon the people the interest and importance of state history and the value of the work of the societies. There has been a refreshing variation in the experiments in magazine publication by state historical agencies.⁷ There still are state historical magazines that employ verse and meter in the writing of state history and that exemplify the antiquarian point of view; it cannot be denied that some are lamentably edited and that some are very shabbily printed. It is equally true, however,

⁵ See Avery O. Craven's review of Joseph Schafer, *Four Wisconsin Counties*, in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 14: 561-564 (March, 1928).

⁶ A discriminating appraisal of "State History," by Dixon Ryan Fox, appears in the *Political Science Quarterly*, 36: 572-585 (December, 1921). See also his article "Outstanding Activities of the Historical Societies 1920-1923," in the Conference of Historical Societies, *Proceedings*, 1923, p. 11-19.

⁷ An interesting account of "The Historical Society Magazines as Viewed by an Outsider," by William B. Shaw, appears in the Conference of Historical Societies, *Proceedings*, 1923, p. 20-27.

that not a few of the state magazines have set high standards with reference both to technical excellence and historical approach and are also attractive in appearance. The experiment of Iowa, which has cut the Gordian knot of the problem of the popular and scientific writing of history by publishing both a quarterly and a monthly magazine, the latter distinctively popular, has been watched with admiring interest. In most states, however, there is but one state historical magazine. In a number of cases these have achieved marked success from the standpoints both of scholarship and of interest. The editor of the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* recently called attention to "the amazing development of regional historical publications" as an "interesting phenomenon of American life" and suggested that the Middle West has taken the lead in the movement.⁸ It is possible that the success of the state magazines is in part responsible for the inclusion in the endowment program of the American Historical Association of the possible establishment of a popular magazine — as yet unborn — to bring out "historical articles dealing with topics of general interest and so written as to appeal to the average person of culture."⁹

An evidence of the popularity of the state magazines is to be found in the frequency with which articles are reprinted in newspapers as "feature stories." Probably Missouri has witnessed a more extensive newspaper use of its magazine items than any other state, though such use is not uncommon elsewhere. The use of the press as a medium for disseminating knowledge of state and local history has been notably developed by the state societies. The publication of monthly press bulletins, begun by Iowa in 1911, by Wisconsin in 1914, and by Minnesota in 1921, has supplied hundreds of newspapers with short historical articles and news items that have

⁸ *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 14: 437 (December, 1927).

⁹ "Program for the Use of the Income from an Endowment Fund of a Million Dollars," a mimeographed circular issued by the American Historical Association in August, 1926.

been extensively reprinted. In Missouri a news letter to newspaper editors entitled "This Week in Missouri History" is regarded as one of the two most effective means employed in the last five years in making the work of the State Historical Society of Missouri known and in popularizing the history of the state. The State Historical Society of Iowa has furnished the newspapers through the Associated Press with a series entitled "Stories Out of Iowa's Past" and it took advantage of the "Ask Me Another" vogue to supply the press with a thousand questions and answers on Iowa history. Numerous other possibilities in connection with the press have been exploited. Thus Dr. Schafer, superintendent of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, recently wrote six articles on the chief racial elements in that state for distribution to the press through the department of rural journalism of the University of Wisconsin. In many states newspapers are encouraged to draw upon historical society materials for "feature stories." If the results are sometimes disconcerting, it is also true that such historical features are often better than the usual feature stories and that sometimes they result in the turning up of diaries and other manuscript materials. In general this use of the press, aside from its influence in placing historical items before readers, seems to open the door to desirable publicity for the societies; it tends to encourage local historical writing; and it may be considered a wholesome thing.

Five years ago Dr. Buck called attention to the desirability of making the programs of state historical society meetings broader in interest than those so familiar in the past. There has been genuine progress in this direction, and the state historical meeting with scholarly papers, interesting and suggestive addresses, and spirited discussions of local history problems is now common. In Minnesota since 1921 a state historical convention has been held each summer. The meetings have occurred in different parts of the state and each one has been preceded by an organized "historic tour" from the Twin

Cities, with stops at places of special interest. In 1927 more than eighty automobiles were in line at one stage of the tour and one session of the convention — held jointly with a local old settlers' association — attracted an audience of about fifteen hundred people. In Indiana similar historical pilgrimages and meetings have had marked success. The annual meetings of the Minnesota Historical Society have broadened out from affairs of one session with an annual address to all-day programs, usually with a local history conference in the morning, a luncheon at noon, and afternoon and evening sessions for addresses and historical papers.

Much attention has been given at the annual meetings and conventions of the Minnesota Historical Society to the problem of local history organization, and one of the interesting evidences of the growth of historical interest in that state is a crop of newly organized county historical societies. In most of the states of the Middle West the local historical society movement, which promises much in the collection of records, the writing of local history, the erection of markers, and the general promotion of historical work, has been vigorously forwarded in recent years. In states like Indiana, Missouri, Illinois, and Wisconsin, the activities of such societies, closely affiliated with the state agencies, are on a firm basis; and in the states farther north and west progress has been rapid. Allied with this matter is the establishment of local historical museums. This is looked upon as one of the main objectives of the state society in Indiana.¹⁰ Mention may be made here of state fair exhibits and traveling museum exhibits, both of which have been employed by the Minnesota Historical Society to forward interest in the society and in the state's history.

¹⁰ Though much attention has been given to the museum movement, perhaps not as much has been done as would be desirable in the matter of encouraging local libraries to cultivate the field of local history. On some possibilities here see Augustus H. Shearer, "The Public Library and Local History," in *New York Libraries*, 8: 135-138 (November, 1922).

Lectures and talks by staff members are a standard feature of the work of public education as carried on by many state historical societies. Perhaps the most interesting development in this general field has been the use of the radio. In Iowa a notable series of radio talks is given in connection with "Iowa History Week" — a week when the whole state is called upon to exploit its history. It would be interesting to know more about the results of state history radio talks, but effective checks apparently have not been made. In Minnesota, where one series of more than twenty radio talks was given, there were instances of family papers and diaries turned over to the society as a result of invitations broadcast. In Missouri state historical radio talks have met with a wide response of interest. With radios installed in the schools it becomes possible for one talk, given at an appropriate hour, to be heard in school assemblies throughout the state. Closely related to the use of lectures and talks is that of the lantern and especially the motion picture. Some societies have installed archives for motion picture films and sponsored the exhibition of films in various communities. In one state an historical pageant on a large scale was filmed and the film widely exhibited. In Minnesota at a summer convention held in St. Cloud, a film history of that city and its vicinity, prepared by a local newspaper, formed a number on the program. It is apparent that the state societies are taking into account the value of visual education in their work. Probably, however, they have only passed the beginning stages.

Such dramatic attempts at the visual reconstruction of past events as pageants possess remarkable power of attracting public attention. Unfortunately, however, they are frequently handled with scant attention to accuracy either of detail or of interpretation. It is therefore encouraging to note that some societies have taken steps toward the improvement of historical pageants. In Iowa, for example, the state historical society has distributed the texts of two excellent pageants on the Indians and the pioneers. Pageants are frequently given in

connection with anniversary celebrations. It is to be noted that in some states historical agencies give special attention to sponsoring popular movements of a commemorative character. An interesting case of this sort is the work of the Indiana Historical Society in relation to the observance of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of George Rogers Clark's capture of Vincennes and the organization of a national memorial at Vincennes. Here is an instance of an enterprise on a large scale that will attract the attention and arouse the interest of people not only in Indiana but throughout the whole country.

Many state historical societies have actively interested themselves in the promotion of historic marking, and the progress of that movement in the last fifteen or twenty years — a period synchronizing with the democratization of the automobile and the rapid improvement of highways — has been remarkable, especially in the Middle West. The giving of advice with reference to inscriptions has been one form of aid by historical societies. Another is the preparation of guides to landmarks, a recent example of which is that by Dr. Louise P. Kellogg on "Wisconsin Historical Landmarks," "grouped by regions, and listed as nearly as may be for the convenience of tourists following the well-known lines of travel."¹¹ Coöperation with state officials, organizations, local communities, and individuals seems to be the keynote to state historical society activity in this field.¹² In some states the subject is closely related to that of state parks, and the encouragement of historical society officials has been given to the better administration of public memorials, to the creation of new parks,

¹¹ State Historical Society of Wisconsin, *Proceedings, 1927*, appendix.

¹² Colorado points the way to an interesting method of stimulating "historic marking." Dr. J. N. Hall of Denver has established a trust fund of five thousand dollars, the income of which is "to be paid under direction of the State Historical Society for the purpose of erecting and aiding in the erection, from time to time, of permanent monuments, memorials, markers and tablets identifying the location of places of historic interest in Colorado." See "The Mrs. J. N. Hall Endowment," in the *Colorado Magazine*, 5: 33 (February, 1928).

embracing in some cases areas of special historical interest, and to the proper care of such parks.¹³

An important aspect of the work of most state historical agencies is the conducting of historical information bureaus. In Minnesota a large number of inquiries are received each year, covering numerous phases of state and local history. These are given careful attention, in many cases involving research in manuscripts, and often yield interesting collateral results. In Indiana, where genealogical as well as historical questions are answered, there are as many as three or four thousand inquiries handled each year. In general there has been a rapid increase in the last five years in the number of inquiries received by the societies. The information bureau work, involving as it does the application of historical method to concrete state historical problems, is an important part of the general public educational enterprises of the state societies.

Yet another field to which some societies have given special attention is that of promoting the teaching of state and local history in the schools. Among the means employed to further this work, aside from the usual facilities and publications of the societies, the preparation of guides, outlines, textbooks, books of readings, and the like would seem to be of special importance.

It is clear that the exploitation of public state historical interest is on a solid basis, fortified by experience. The writer does not urge any particular state to use the ideas or practices that have been described. State and local circumstances of course must be taken into account in every case and necessary adaptations made. Doubtless many other ideas that have not been touched upon here are being successfully applied, and new and perhaps better practices will be originated and tried. This paper is not intended to leave the impression that all the state historical agencies are uniformly successful in their pub-

¹³ See in this connection an interesting report on the state parks of Minnesota by Ray P. Chase, published under the title *Statement to the Nineteen Hundred Twenty-three Legislature*.

lic educational work. Nor is it the writer's intention to offer any criticism of agencies that have limited their activities to collection, publication, and service for scholars. Here are certain ideas, practices, and experiments that are available for use or adaptation. In most cases it is possible to determine whether they have worked ill or well.

A few suggestions may be offered in closing, looking toward the filling in of certain gaps revealed by a survey of the general situation:

First, it might be desirable to take further steps toward the improvement of local historical writing. The influence of historical magazines of high standards is powerful. Manuscripts by non-professional local historical writers are frequently criticized in friendly spirit by professional historians. The setting up of high ideals in local historical societies is an aid. The publication of historical newspaper articles sent out from the state historical society helps. Encouragement of trained teachers of history to exploit local historical subjects is useful. But possibly something more can be done. The writer agrees with Dr. Schafer that "any person of intelligence who has a bent in that direction can learn to deal with problems of local history in a historical spirit and by methods that will yield sound results."¹⁴ The writer would like to suggest the advisability of preparing a simple manual or guide in local historical investigation for beginners. Some years ago a practical manual of this type was prepared by a federation of local historical agencies in Norway, where the study of local history has reached a very high plane. The edition of this manual was quickly sold out and a new and more elaborate handbook is now being prepared that embraces instruction in the purposes of local historical research, kinds of sources, possible subjects for investigation, methods of treating the history of a farm, archives and libraries, maps, town and district history, and the like. A number of noted scholars are collaborating in its

¹⁴ State Historical Society of Wisconsin, *Proceedings*, 1927, p. 34.

preparation.¹⁵ Some states in this country have made practical suggestions along some of these lines in occasional leaflets, and Dr. Schafer, who seems bent on enlisting the coöperation of all Wisconsin in his study of local history, issued in 1926 a useful *Schedule for the Study of Local History of Wisconsin Rural Towns*. There would seem to be a need, however, for something more comprehensive and of more general value, and it might be prepared coöperatively. Let it be remembered that an astounding number of persons occasionally turn their hands to local historical research. Through state and local societies it would be possible to reach many of these workers. Many local historians might resent attempts to insist upon technical scholarship, but it is highly probable that most would welcome some aid in fundamentals, especially if offered in so unobtrusive a way.

Second, it might be desirable to encourage local historical societies that have collected manuscripts to draw up finding lists of their manuscript materials and to file copies of these lists with the state societies. The same suggestion incidentally might be offered to all state historical agencies with reference to their own manuscripts, so that lists of such materials could be on file with other societies, not merely in the interest of local workers in their own states but to serve scholars throughout the land.

Third, in the field of the teaching of state history it might be desirable to prepare outlines or syllabi with special attention to the correlation of state history with national history. Most teachers would welcome constructive suggestions for such a correlation. Their main difficulty ordinarily is twofold; how to correlate state history with a general course and

¹⁵ The first handbook, edited by Lorens Berg and others, bore the title *Veiledning i lokalhistoriske undersøkelser for begyndere*. An account of the plans for the manual now being prepared appears in *Heimen*, 2: 125-126 (1927). This interesting magazine, edited by Professor Oscar A. Johnsen of the University of Oslo, is published semiannually as the organ of *Landslaget for bygde-og byhistorie*, that is, the National Society for District and Town History.

where to get state history materials. Outlines of the kind suggested might prove a welcome aid to them on both scores.¹⁶

Fourth, allusion to a plan that has been followed in one European country for improving local historical work suggests possible advantages in familiarizing ourselves with the methods and organization that have been worked out in this field in the various European countries. The times seem to demand coöperation among those interested in forwarding the history cause—coöperation of local historical societies among themselves and with state societies, coöperation of state societies with other state societies and with the regional and national organizations. The writer believes that plans might be developed for coöperation between American local history interests and those of Europe—for example, in the collection of letters and diaries sent from pioneers in localities of the Middle West to their friends in England or Germany or Norway or Switzerland or other countries of the Old World.¹⁷

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¹⁶ See Asa E. Martin, "One Solution of the State History Problem," in the *Historical Outlook*, 16:163-164 (April, 1925); and the writer's "Minnesota History: A Study Outline, with a Plan for the Correlation of State and National History," mimeographed by Hamline University, St. Paul, in 1927.

¹⁷ It may be of interest to note in this connection that the Norwegian-American Historical Association has already entered upon a plan of coöperation with the National Society for District and Town History in Norway for the collection of "America letters." Through this organization contacts have been established with the various Norwegian localities; the entire subject was discussed at a meeting of the national society in the summer of 1927; and a vigorous effort is now under way to locate manuscripts that throw light upon the emigration from Norway and upon conditions in the settlements that were established in the New World by the Norwegian immigrants. The manuscripts that come to light will be preserved in a central depository in the Norwegian capital, Oslo, and photostatic copies or typewritten transcripts will be secured by the Norwegian-American Historical Association for preservation in the library of St. Olaf College at Northfield.



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