

MINNESOTA HISTORY

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Conserving Minnesota's History in Wartime

AS THE EVENING session of the Minnesota Historical Society's annual meeting drew to a close, those who attended the four sessions remarked upon the fact that a single theme ran through many of the papers and talks presented. Dean Blegen's appeal for the "protection of our cultural heritage" served as a climax not only to his own survey of the vast cultural resources built up by two leading state institutions over a period of almost a century, but to the programs of the entire day. Speakers who addressed the local history conference in the morning suggested the part that can be played in time of war by county and community leaders of historical work and told how the activities of the local historical society fit into the war program. In the hope that readers of this magazine will find them useful, the address presented by Dean Blegen at the evening session and three short papers read in connection with the morning meeting are published herewith. Ed.

THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
AND THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Theodore C. Blegen

WHEN WILLIAM WATTS FOLWELL came to Minnesota in 1869 as the first president of the University of Minnesota, he found one building on the campus — the "Old Main." It was heated by forty-three wood stoves. The narrow stairs that connected the second and third floors were so dark and winding that Dr. Folwell found it necessary to

station on them an "officer of the day" to prevent student collisions. This "officer of the day" was presumably our first personnel and guidance official. As Dr. Folwell surveyed the pioneer temple of learning, he was troubled by its deficiencies and bluntly told the board of regents that it was "not an exaggeration to say that the building has no system of ventilation" whatever. The fire hazards and the danger to life seemed terrible to him, with more than two hundred students—14 freshmen and 216 preparatory students—in the building. The latter group included, in Dr. Folwell's phrase, "146 gentlemen and 70 ladies."

Notwithstanding difficulties, Dr. Folwell launched the university on its career. He believed that he and his colleagues could carry on the work, and he challenged the people of the state with his vision of a great center of learning. One thing that he never tired of calling to the attention of the regents was the need for books and of space in which to house them. "When I reported for duty in September, 1869," he wrote many years later, "the library consisted mainly of a set of sixteen volumes of an encyclopedia." Those were the beginnings of a university library that today numbers 1,200,000 accessioned volumes and is one of the half-dozen greatest university libraries in America. It places a slight strain upon the imagination to think of a university functioning with a library consisting mainly of a sixteen-volume encyclopedia. But Dr. Folwell, though of course he had to think of stairs and fire hazards and other material problems, was an educational statesman who put first things first. Not long after he arrived on the campus he declared to the regents, "The first great interest of the University is, of course, the instruction. Next to that comes the Library." In his inaugural address, a document in which he dreamed dreams of what a great university might mean to Minnesota in the future, he also envisaged a great library and said, "To such a library as will some day exist here, can resort not only the scholar, and the learned author, but the historian, the statistician, the legislator, the editor, the manufacturer and the inventor, to consult those works which are beyond reach of private means." A great dream indeed, and a dream come true—even

though Dr. Folwell, in his category of users, seems to imply that the historian is a different species from the scholar.

When Dr. Folwell made his report for 1869 he was able to announce the first gift of any size to the university library. It was a gift of some seventy-odd volumes. Tonight, when the state historical society honors the university by meeting on the same, though perhaps slightly changed, campus to which Dr. Folwell came in 1869, it gives me great pleasure to report that that gift of seventy-odd volumes, made in the first year after the university opened its doors to college students, came from the Minnesota Historical Society. I believe that the precise number of volumes was seventy-four, but when I say seventy-odd volumes, I am, I think, stating the precise truth, for there were some odd books in the gift. It included such works as *Discoveries among the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon*, *Peruvian Antiquities*, volume 2 of Davidson's Vergil, and volumes 6, 7, and 12 of *Explorations and Surveys for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean*. But the university was delighted with the gift, and the Minnesota Historical Society still has in its files a letter saying how "thankfully" it was received and expressing warm appreciation of the society's "effort" in behalf of the university.

It would be interesting to go on and tell the story of the building of a great university library — how in the first year twelve hundred volumes were purchased for twelve hundred dollars from Colonel Daniel A. Robertson, a collection including a seventy-volume set of Voltaire and a six-volume edition of Charlevoix; how in 1873 the university purchased the twenty-five hundred volumes comprising the private library of former President Henry P. Tappan of the University of Michigan; how, after Dr. Folwell had been here only four years, the library had grown from a sixteen-volume encyclopedia to a collection of ten thousand books; and how Dr. Folwell himself served as librarian through many years after his presidency and helped to make his pioneer library dreams come true. He never lost his deep interest in the university library and in library matters. I may mention one small evidence of that interest when he was a

very old man. In the 1920's Dr. Folwell was working on his *History of Minnesota*; I was then the assistant superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society. Dr. Folwell had taken note of the fact that in the library catalogues his own writings were listed, under the Cutter system of numbering, with the symbol F73. Frequently he would write me cards and notes asking me to look up this or that, and almost invariably he signed them "V.t.y" — that is "Very truly yours," — F73. To me, F73 was William Watts Folwell.

What interests me chiefly this evening, however, is not so much the story of the university library as the good will and co-operation between the society and the university, symbolized nearly three-quarters of a century ago by the pioneer gift of books. Not a few of the founders and builders of the university were also founders and builders of the society, and the reason, I think, lies in the identity of ideals motivating the two institutions. Both stood for the service of the truth and the promotion of the welfare of the people. Both stood for cultural continuity. Both, created by a free people, were institutions of a kind that, in President Ford's phrase, helps to "keep the mind free and the spirit of man aloft." Dr. Folwell, in his university inaugural, might have been speaking for the society when, addressing a people struggling with the material problems of the western frontier, he voiced the cause of education, called for perspective, and asked the state to hold fast to enduring values. "We do not cling to the past in order to reproduce it," he said, "but because we cannot spare its lessons. We cannot spare its examples of heroism, martyrdom, patriotism, valor, love. Unhappy will that nation be which cuts itself off from the past. As well might a seaman throw overboard his compass and charts, and resolve to steer his ship by chalk marks on her taffrail." Alexander Ramsey might have been speaking for the university when in 1849 he called upon Minnesotans to preserve the records of the process of building a commonwealth, advocated "history in a land of yesterday," and urged the pioneers to found a history society on the frontier rim of America.

In 1849 Minnesota Territory was established, the first newspaper

of Minnesota issued, and the Minnesota Historical Society founded; two years later the University of Minnesota was chartered. Thus at the outset of the commonwealth's history the people had a free press for the dissemination of ideas and information, an organized society devoted to preserving for the future the product of that press and other records, and the charter of a university for the people of the commonwealth. It is not surprising to learn that Dr. Edward D. Neill, the chancellor of the projected university, was also, from 1851 to 1863, the secretary of the society; that Henry H. Sibley was one of the founders of both institutions, served as president of the society for a dozen years, and was also for many years president of the university board of regents. The tradition of close co-operation between the two institutions has deepened in relatively recent times, for in 1913 Dean Guy Stanton Ford was made a member of the society's executive council, and the next year Dr. Solon J. Buck of the university history department became its secretary and superintendent. In the following years he took the lead in reorganizing the society and greatly expanding its collections and services. Perhaps the most remarkable example, however, of the co-operation of the society and the university is to be found in the services of Dr. Folwell himself. Throughout the years he had been fertile in ideas for the developing society, but no one could have dreamed that in the 1920's the state society would publish a great four-volume *History of Minnesota* written by the man who in 1869 came to the frontier to head the infant University of Minnesota. In 1869 Dr. Folwell placed the scholar in one class and the historian in another, but in the 1920's he himself combined the two by giving us our best history of this state. Nothing that I could say about the society and university research could find better exemplification than the comprehensive history that this man, a man of our university classes and campus, wrote for our sister institution in St. Paul. When to all this I add that Dr. Folwell served a term as president of the state historical society, that Dean Ford also held that honored position in the 1930's, that the new president of the society is the head of our university history department, Professor Lester B. Shippee, and that the

efficient superintendent of the society is Dr. Arthur J. Larsen, trained in the university history department, I think you will all agree that the tradition of friendly co-operation between the two is a vital tradition.¹

But there is another side to the story. I have referred to the great library of the University of Minnesota, but I have not said much about that rich laboratory for the student of history—the books, newspapers, and manuscripts of the state society. Here on this campus, in a time when as never before we need to understand the meaning of our past and to appreciate our heritage—here are teachers and students engaged in studies of that past and heritage. There, in the Historical Building, are collections of priceless records. Among them are the letters, diaries, and other records left by Alexander Ramsey, the first governor of Minnesota Territory; by Henry H. Sibley, fur trader and first governor of the state; by Lawrence Taliaferro, Indian agent at old Fort Snelling; by Ignatius Donnelly, the leader of agrarian third parties; by Knute Nelson, United States senator from Minnesota; by Henry B. Whipple, bishop and friend of the Indians; by William W. Folwell, university president and historian; and by hundreds of other Minnesotans. When I say that this collection includes the personal papers of explorers, senators, governors, legislators, lawyers, doctors, engineers, architects, geologists, bankers, lumbermen, railroad builders, steamboatmen, millers, missionaries, ministers, merchants, farmers, teachers, even blacksmiths and shoemakers—all makers of Minnesota and America—I give only a hint of the treasures that make the society's collection one of the most notable in America. It stirs my imagination to think of those treasures, of their potential value to students, and of the articles and books that can be produced from them if we can but bring students and records together. And I think that nothing in my experience at the society was quite so exciting as the constant

¹ To this list of the men who have served as leaders both of the society and the university, Dean Blegen's name must be added. His connection with the society, first as assistant superintendent and then as secretary and superintendent, spanned the period from 1922 to 1939, and he continues to serve as a member of its executive council. During much of this period he served also as a member of the history faculty in the university, and in 1940 he was named dean of its graduate school. *Ed.*

search for and finding of old records, a game in which we called upon the people of the state to join us.

The story of the building of that collection will match the story of the university library. As early as 1860 the society acquired the manuscript journal of Stephen H. Long's narrative of a trip of exploration into the Minnesota country in 1817. In the late 1860's it got the wonderful Taliaferro diaries. Unfortunately, some volumes were missing. That was too bad, for it broke the sequence of the record. More than sixty years later a Minnesota man browsing in a St. Louis bookstore picked up an old handwritten volume and noted such familiar words as Fort Snelling, Sioux, and Chippewa. The volume, the dealer explained, had been found with some rubbish in an old St. Louis cellar. The Minnesota man bought it and sent it to the society. It was one of the missing Taliaferro diaries and it fitted neatly into an empty niche in the series. In 1893 the Sibley Papers came to the society. And so year after year, the collection was built up. But it has grown most rapidly in the past quarter century. And I am glad to say that out of our university classes has come some interesting co-operation. One of my own students found in the basement of a St. Paul building the old records of the Mississippi steamboat magnate, Commodore Davidson; another located a barrel of papers relating to the Sweetman Irish colony of southern Minnesota; and one of Professor Osgood's students brought to a class in American history an original diary kept on the Long expedition of 1823 by James E. Colhoun, a nephew of John C. Calhoun. Such records, when found, go to the Minnesota Historical Society, or if the originals cannot be secured for the society, film copies are taken.

No one who has not taught a class in history can understand the stimulus of interest that comes of putting students in actual contact with original documents. My first experience of this kind happened many years ago when I was a high-school teacher in Milwaukee. I sent my students on an attic hunt for old records and one of them brought into class a diary kept by a great-grandfather who was a forty-niner. It recorded a trip across the plains in 1849, told of hunt-

ing gold in the Sacramento Valley, and described a return to Wisconsin by way of Panama and New York. I still remember the tense interest of my class and myself as the boy read the diary to us. We were studying American history at the middle of the nineteenth century and we had been reading about the California gold rush. Well, here was the real thing. The story we had been studying became alive and convincing to us as no textbook could make it. Ever since that experience I have had a sharp interest in the discovery and use of original records.

The point I am coming to is that our Minnesota students have been and are exploring the records collected by the historical society. I have recently looked over a half hundred masters' theses written at this university, all of which are based largely upon the society's records. Their subject matter includes land policies, frontier homes, flour milling, lumbering, railroad history, immigration, politics, the church, banking, finance, the fur trade, labor, journalism, public opinion, roads and travel, the story of communities, biographies of leaders in various fields, and other topics. Similarly I find a dozen or more doctors' theses, with topics ranging from the agricultural history of Minnesota to a life of Sibley and a study of wild life conservation. It is not so much the importance of such studies to the public in terms of books and articles that I want to emphasize, though much of this research has resulted in publication, as the creative influence of the research itself upon the students, an influence carried with them into their work wherever they are.

I might also speak of the research in the collections of the society which has found its way into books published by the University of Minnesota Press. A dozen volumes readily come to my mind, including Charles M. Gates's *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, Lester B. Shippee's edition of *Bishop Whipple's Southern Diary*, Mildred L. Hartsough's *From Canoe to Steel Barge on the Upper Mississippi*, George M. Stephenson's *John Lind of Minnesota*, which is based primarily upon the Lind Papers, Netta W. Wilson's life of *Alfred Owre, Dentistry's Militant Educator*, Edgar B. Wesley's book on *Owatonna*, a model study of an American community, and

Helen Clapesattle's *The Doctors Mayo*, a brilliant combination of good research and good writing which drew to no small extent upon the newspaper and manuscript treasures of the society. If I had time to go on and tell of other studies, published here and in other parts of the country, which have come in considerable part out of the society's materials, I should gradually build up a description of a Northwest regional literature which in the full compass of its range and variety has made a notable contribution to our understanding of American history. Drawing upon cultural resources, scholars have added to the cultural riches of the region and the nation.

While I was thinking over my topic for this program, I received a letter from Washington asking me to serve as the chairman of a state committee on the conservation of the cultural resources of Minnesota. The request came from the President's National Resources Planning Board. It was a war and emergency request. I have already brought together the state committee and we have started work. Our problem is to survey the state to determine what irreplaceable or peculiarly valuable cultural and scientific treasures are exposed to possible damage; to formulate plans for the removal of certain treasures and to survey storage space; to take steps to guard against the destruction or damage of cultural resources, especially records and papers, as a result of urgent war work and emergency needs for space; to offer haven to treasures in coastal areas more exposed than the Middle West to possible enemy attack; and in general to protect our cultural resources as a part of the civilian defense effort.

It seems to me that this war request bears a relation to the values that I have been trying to emphasize tonight. In the midst of a gigantic war effort the government calls upon us to make plans to conserve our cultural resources. We know that, as a part of the civilization we are pledged and determined to defend and preserve, these resources are precious beyond price. What we are doing in the war is in fact to defend our cultural heritage. So, in speaking as I have done tonight about the university and the state historical society, I have been thinking about our cultural resources and our cultural heritage. I am reminded that during the first World War,

in 1918, the building of the Minnesota Historical Society was dedicated, with Frederick J. Turner, the interpreter of the westward movement, as the chief speaker. We did not then, and we do not now, forget the cause of history, education, and the conserving of cultural resources amid the grim urgency of war. Turner spoke in 1918 on Middle Western democracy, and he said that the times were appropriate for erecting a new "home for history." When he said that America was fighting for historic ideals, he used words that seem to me to be vivid with truth today. "If this nation is one for which we should pour out our savings," he said, "postpone our differences, go hungry, and even give up life itself, it is not because it is a rich, extensive, well-fed, and populous nation; it is because from its early days America has pressed onward toward a goal of its own; because it has followed an ideal, the ideal of a democracy developing under conditions unlike those of any other age or country." America was then at war, he said, that the history of the United States might "not become the lost and tragic story of a futile dream." I believe Turner's words are true today, and I believe that in the national conviction of the truth they embody is the assurance of victory and of the protection of our cultural heritage.

LOCAL HISTORICAL MUSEUMS AND THE WAR PROGRAM

Bertha L. Heilbron

WHEN THE LIBRARY and museum at Hyde Park in which President Roosevelt's papers and collections are housed was opened on June 30, 1941, the chief executive appropriately included in his dedicatory address some remarks on the significance of such an institution in a democracy. "Among democracies the building of libraries and museums for the use of all the people flourishes," said the President. "That is especially true in our own land," he continued, "for we believe that people should work out for themselves, and through their own study, the determination of their best interest rather than accept such so-called information as may be handed out to them by

self-constituted leaders." And he added that "It is in keeping with the well-considered trend in these difficult days that we are distributing historical collections more widely than ever throughout our land."

Certainly here in Minnesota historical collections are widely distributed. In every section of our state, from Roseau on the north to Fairmont on the south, from Moorhead on the west to Duluth and Stillwater on the east, local historical museums are flourishing. In the past few years, I have had an opportunity to see a number of these collections, and I have gained impressions and made comparisons which I shall attempt to pass on to you today.

Of the sixty-odd historical societies now active in Minnesota, perhaps two-thirds have museum collections of one kind or another. In addition, there are a few museums that are not affiliated with societies. They are housed in quarters that vary in suitability from the magnificent building specially erected for the Brown County Historical Society to damp and dingy rooms in the basements of antiquated courthouses. I do not mean to imply that basement rooms are always damp and dingy and inadequate. I think, for example, of the room in the basement of the Rochester Public Library that has been so attractively adapted to the purposes of the Olmsted County Historical Society. And there is the spacious room in the high-school building at Hutchinson, where the McLeod County society has its exhibits. A museum of real distinction is that in the basement of the Cokato library. In a library also, but on an upper floor, is the museum of the Rice County society. Among other localities that provide space in public buildings for historical museums are Roseau, Duluth, Brainerd, and St. Louis Park in Hennepin County. Museums at Winona and Moorhead are on the campuses of state teachers' colleges.

A few years ago a Frenchman who was traveling in the United States remarked that "Few Americans live in or near the house where they were born," but that "not infrequently in small towns one sees a single stone building, standing in the midst of less permanent constructions, preserved as a specimen of the home and

dedicated to the town as a museum.”¹ He could see such houses today in several Minnesota communities—in Stillwater, for example, where the old warden’s residence has been recently deeded by the state to the local historical society; or in Mankato, where a mansion of the 1870’s, in itself an object of no slight historical interest, has been adapted to museum purposes.

The museum has been described as the “chief agent in bringing the public and the historical society together.”² We have plenty of evidence here in Minnesota that the public is familiar with our local museums. Two thousand people saw the museum at Hutchinson on its opening day in 1939—a crowd equal in size to two-thirds of the city’s population. The secretary of the Otter Tail County society reported recently that since its museum at Fergus Falls opened in 1934, it has received more than 30,000 visitors who registered. On a holiday a few years ago, 150 people saw the Roseau museum; and the Round Tower museum at Fort Snelling attracted over 300 visitors on a single Sunday last October. At Rochester, about 1,300 visitors were counted in the museum’s first three months in 1940. After the opening day about eighty-five per cent of the visitors came from outside the county or the state. Obviously, a large number of the transients who seek medical aid in Rochester are finding their way to the Olmsted County museum and carrying away impressions of southern Minnesota’s background. It has been estimated that the Crow Wing County museum at Brainerd receives about 5,000 visitors each year, many of them during the summer tourist season. It is not surprising that in many communities businessmen look upon the local museum as an important tourist attraction.

The frequent changing of exhibits helps to sustain interest in the museum, once it is firmly established. The Brown County Society at New Ulm, for example, devotes four floor cases to temporary displays that are changed every two weeks. In some of them portraits of early settlers are rotated in alphabetical order, and pioneers and

¹ Raoul de Roussy de Sales, “What Makes an American,” in *The Atlantic*, 163:300 (March, 1939).

² Alexander J. Wall, “The Place of the Historical Society and Museum in the United States and Elsewhere,” in Conference of State and Local Historical Societies, *Proceedings*, 1937, p. 10.

their descendants have come to watch for the display of pictures of their own families and to visit the museum when they may be seen. Mr. Fred W. Johnson, the moving spirit of the New Ulm museum, agrees with a local historical leader who wrote recently that "History is an abstract thing until we suddenly find that our own family had a hand in its making."³ In building up and maintaining his collection, he appeals to family pride, believing that the children and grandchildren of pioneers will co-operate in an undertaking that helps to perpetuate the memories of their forebears.

There are some notable examples in Minnesota of co-operation between the schools and the local museums, and most of the latter have records of group visits by classes and teachers. The Hutchinson museum is not only in the school, but its entire program has been linked with school activities. Some societies have conducted local history essay contests, offering prizes for the best narratives written by school children. An unusual form of co-operation is to be found in Roseau County, where trips to the museum have been awarded by a local chapter of the American Legion to honor students in the rural schools.

The work of any local society, whether it is collecting and preserving the raw materials of history or making them available to the people of the community, must of necessity be far more specialized than the work of the state society. It has been said that "each society of energy and enterprise will find in its area some special work to do, a work pressed upon it by special circumstance."⁴ Thus at Cass Lake a great Chippewa Indian collection has been assembled. Special attention has been given by the Rice County society to the commercial development of the Cannon Valley and to the growth of educational institutions in the county. An exhibit of logging camp equipment, including cooking utensils used in such camps, is the feature of the Crow Wing County museum. This exhibit typifies the northern Minnesota logging industry; it is to be hoped that

³ Lou D. MacWethy, "Making Local History Pay," in Columbia County [New York] Historical Society, *Quarterly Bulletin*, no. 29, p. 8 (January, 1935).

⁴ Louis Blake Duff, "The Problems and Opportunities of Canadian Historical Societies," in *Canadian Historical Review*, 13:256 (September, 1932).

the Washington County museum will collect logging materials for the St. Croix Valley. Two outstanding collections in the St. Louis County museum relate to North Shore history. They are the manuscripts left by Edmund F. Ely, a pioneer missionary in the Lake Superior country, and the paintings and sketches of North Shore scenes and Indians made by Eastman Johnson when he visited the region in the 1850's. The newly organized Hibbing Historical Society has an opportunity to supplement the St. Louis County museum by giving emphasis to the history of the iron mines. The author of the recently published biography of *The Doctors Mayo* found useful the collections of the Olmsted County society. The Round Tower museum at Fort Snelling specializes in the history of Minnesota's oldest military post. It is natural that the Hutchinson museum should contain much material on cultural history, for the community was founded and bears the name of three New Englanders who played an important role in the nation's musical history. An excellent example of a local concern with the folkways of the pioneers is to be found in the Cokato museum, where the collections consist largely of domestic and agricultural implements characteristic of those used by the Scandinavians who settled in Wright County. Both originals and miniature reproductions are included in this unique collection, which has been assembled and arranged by Mr. and Mrs. R. M. Peterson.

In addition to what we usually think of as museum objects, local societies in Minnesota are collecting manuscripts, newspapers, archives, business records, genealogical records, books, pamphlets, pictures, maps. Outstanding is the picture collection of the New Ulm museum, which includes more than ten thousand portraits of Brown County pioneers. There are important newspaper collections in such counties as Blue Earth, Olmsted, and Rice. A method for building up a local historical library was suggested recently by the Waseca County Historical Society, when it announced its plan "to honor the memory of each departed member with a book to be placed in the county library." In Kandiyohi County, both the society and the local officials realize that the historical society has a

heavy responsibility in caring for the local archives. The society recently received from the county board an appropriation of a thousand dollars to be used in constructing a fireproof vault in its museum building, thus assuring the safe preservation of archives and other valuable records in its custody.

The success with which local museum workers make their collections available to and readily usable by the public varies greatly in Minnesota. Only a few examples can be cited. In Blue Earth County a trained librarian has carefully identified and specifically labeled every item acquired, and has instituted a system of keeping accessions records and making inventories of the museum's holdings. At Cokato, easily read, hand-lettered labels are used. The specially designed wall cases and excellent lighting of the Brown County museum represent an ideal toward which any institution might strive. A few societies, like Martin and Hennepin, are reaching the public through publications.

By looking at historical museums in all sections of Minnesota, I have learned that the local museum is a cultural asset that even the smallest community can support. It takes a large city with a wealthy population to maintain an art museum, a symphony orchestra, or a vast reference library. But a village of a few hundred people can assemble the materials for a historical museum and give it quarters in a public building. Because everybody can participate in its activities, enjoy its exhibits, and understand its objectives, the local historical museum is perhaps the most thoroughly democratic of cultural institutions. Old and young, rich and poor alike can feel that the local museum belongs to them, for all are represented in the story it preserves. It reflects, perhaps more fully than any other single institution in American life, the ideals for which we are staking our all in the present world conflict.

It is significant that the local historical museums here in Minnesota have come into being in the past two decades, in other words, since the first World War. Perhaps that crisis awakened us to an appreciation of our past, a realization that we could not take for granted the values for which our forebears braved the rigors of

frontier life. The museum collections laboriously built up in this spirit are a new responsibility in another time of crisis. Like our liberties, these records of our past are beyond price. Once gone, they cannot be replaced. There is no substitute for them. We cannot afford to push them aside, to neglect them for what may seem more pressing and more immediate needs. For these historical collections are the concrete, tangible reminders of the liberties for which we are at war.

A leaflet issued recently by the National Resources Planning Board in Washington reminds us that the nation's "cultural institutions play an important role in the maintenance of national morale." This suggests a contribution to ultimate victory for America that can be made by all who in the past have helped to conserve its history. By working for and insisting upon the continued maintenance of our historical museums, we can help to maintain national morale. For those who remain on the home front, there probably is no more important duty.

THE LOCAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY IN WARTIME

G. Hubert Smith

THE OBJECTS of local historical societies in Minnesota are the discovery, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge of the history of the community. The accomplishment of these ends has been sought by collecting, recording, and preserving historical facts and materials of many kinds and by making them available to the public in exhibits and files, by holding public meetings devoted to history, by answering requests for information, by publishing historical material in newspapers, periodicals, and books, by sponsoring the preservation of historic sites and the erection of historical markers, and by aiding the cause of history in many other ways. These tasks—and, be it noted, they are self-imposed tasks—are but the acts of groups of people, and merely listing things done does not measure the importance of local historical work. My purpose here is to define the role

of the local historical society in our times, to examine what the society should be, to see what it should accomplish in a democracy at war. Let us leave aside for the moment the matter of the things that historical societies should do; let us ask why these things should be done and what is the result when they are done.

It is beneficial to any cause if upon occasion its principles be examined, its underlying motives and its ultimate effects analyzed. This is just as true in time of peace as of war, but in time of war the examination must be more searching, and the need for examination is more urgent. In our present crisis it is right that we should look into the reasons for and the results of the activities of public groups—not, thank heaven, for the evil purpose of some Gestapo, but to determine whether they illustrate democratic principles at work.

We would all agree, I suspect, that the aims of historical societies are worthy ones. Such aims, like those of schools, colleges, and universities, of libraries and museums of art and science are expressions of the highest intellectual achievements of mankind. A historically informed people is a mainstay of democracy in peacetime, and historical societies contribute heavily to shaping public opinion and directing public action. Their contribution is, in fact, matched only by that of professional teachers of history. But if the aims of historical societies and of teachers are important in time of peace, how much more important are they in time of war! A knowledge of past sacrifice, of the meaning of blood shed for the sacred causes of the past, is a stimulus and a help to democratic peoples in the waging of a war.

It is a help to know one's self in relation to those who have suffered oppression and made sacrifices for the sake of conscience and of justice, who have helped to found civilization, or who have rallied to the defense of country when its life has hung in the balance. Thus the work of local historical societies aids in waging a just war, in fighting for the right of democratic ways for ourselves and for others. It should be the motive of such societies to preserve and to permit a full knowledge of the truth, to keep the record of man's

successes and of his failures in maintaining justice and in establishing human rights.

Upon the attainment of the ideals of history there are special limitations. We have mentioned keeping the record of man's successes and of his failures, and history is based upon that record. Whether the record is a diary, or a photograph, or a garment, or a tool makes no real difference here. History itself, just as the record upon which it is based, is of many kinds, but history is a sham and worthless if it cannot be proved by reference to an original document of some kind. We might well doubt a Valley Forge if we had no yellowing letters, no tattered maps, or blood-stained, ragged leggings. If, then, we need the history of such a struggle, so also do we need the documents upon which its story is based, and if the history is important, so is the record. We must assure the proper collection and preservation and the final use of the documents of the war in which we are now engaged, if the history that will be written is to be full and sound and useful. More records seem to be created in time of war than of peace, and the job of collecting and preserving them is greater than we may imagine — too great, in fact, to be undertaken without thoughtful, well-planned co-operation.

If you have any doubts about the size and scope of the problem that now faces us as volunteer or professional historians, consider for a moment the following brief summary, published by the Minnesota War Records Commission in 1918, of some of the problems that it faced in the first World War. We must know, it reads, how Minnesota "played her part among the free peoples of the world in the fight for world freedom; how she furnished thousands of her sons to the fighting forces of the nation and how these men conducted themselves and what they experienced in camp, at sea, and on the field of battle; how she stood for loyalty at home and suppressed the Hun within her gates; how she readjusted her whole course of life, giving abundantly of her means, her substance, her thought, her time, her strength, her prayers, sacrificing luxuries and making spare use of the necessities of life, and, forgetting all petty rivalries, united in efforts" to win the war, to help the men at the front, and

to aid war sufferers.¹ With certain additions, this might serve as an outline of our present problem. The local historical society should collect and preserve and make available records of all the ways in which the people of its community alter their lives to meet war needs.

To accomplish this, the historical society in time of war must be even more vigilant and alert than in time of peace. It must continue its normal tasks undiminished—the tasks that help tell the story of past peace—lest we lose sight of the goal for which we strive. It must also, however, undertake new tasks arising out of the war, lest we forget the lessons so harshly being learned afresh. These tasks of collecting, preserving, and using records must be undertaken with courage and conviction by those who stay at home. It must be a special duty of those whose time is not wholly occupied with other war services to help our historical societies discharge their rightful obligation to the future of democracy.

The local historical society that does its share of collecting and using community war records will become an important civic force, helping to maintain morale and contributing to the cause of democracy in a world filled with bitter enemies of that system. Emerging from the present period of trial—and, it may be, of adversity—with a shining record of public service, such a society can look forward to a future bright with promise when the victory of democracy has been won. It will have done its share for that cause and it will likewise have established its rightful place in community and world affairs. The society that sees and meets the challenge of the present will lay the foundation for future and still greater accomplishments for the cause of history itself.

COLLECTING WAR RECORDS

Lewis Beeson

“WHAT IS the purpose of the local historical society?” asks a writer in the *Canadian Historical Review* for September, 1932. His answer

¹ *A Statewide Movement for the Collection and Preservation of Minnesota's War Records*, 3 (Minnesota War Records Commission, *Bulletins*, no. 1—St. Paul, 1918).

is, "To preserve. That at least is the final object." There may be many other objectives, he declares, which are useful and helpful in themselves, "but their ultimate value will be determined solely by their contribution to the work of preservation. Before keeping, of course, there must be finding, and the tasks of scholarship lie in between."¹ Records of an event cannot be preserved until they are found. It is to the task of finding records in wartime to which my remarks relate—a task which may be, as Mr. Smith has remarked, "greater than we imagine" and one in which the state and local societies of Minnesota can co-operate.

How, then, can the local society best collect the war records of the community? Perhaps the first thing that will occur to the local historian is the collection of letters, diaries, and accounts of experiences written by the men of the community who are serving in the armed forces of the nation. Societies might compile lists and the service records of local men who have enlisted in the army, the navy, the marine corps, and the coast guard. The most numerous type of "war history" of the Civil, Spanish-American, and first World wars consisted of the rosters of the men who served in the armed forces, with an accompanying war narrative or memoir. This is the task which in the past has been of primary interest to local historians. It is still of great value. The desire to list and record the war services of men from the local community is understandable and commendable.

But the military contributions made by a community in the present war certainly will not represent the whole of its war activities. In modern warfare there is a civilian as well as military front, and the civilian front, as has been shown in Great Britain, may be as important as the military. Hence, the local historical society, if it wishes to fulfill properly its functions as the recording secretary of its community, should be as active in the collection of the records of civilian as of military organizations.

The collection of such records is not easy, for modern total war brings within its scope practically all the members of a community.

¹ Louis Blake Duff, "The Problems and Opportunities of Canadian Historical Societies," in *Canadian Historical Review*, 13:253.

New organizations, such as Bundles for Britain, Chinese War Relief, and Russian War Relief, will be formed, and new officials, like air-raid and blackout wardens and nurses aids, will be appointed. The records of their activities should be collected. Older organizations, such as the Red Cross, the Y.M.C.A., and others will experience an unparalleled expansion, with an extension of activities into every community. Existing civilian organizations, such as clubs, lodges, churches, chambers of commerce, and the like, will subordinate their peacetime programs to a wartime program. State and national governmental agencies will devote more and more of their energies to the war. The activities imposed upon these organizations by military needs should be of interest to the local historical society. When it is realized that civilian morale, civilian contributions to those who have suffered from military activity, civilian buying of government bonds, civilian restriction of purchasing, and civilian production of agricultural products and war materials are as important in the war effort as is the military organization, many other opportunities for the collecting of the records of war activities will be perceived.

The immensity of the war effort will produce a great mass of records in even the smallest community. The Minnesota Victory Aides, for instance, recently announced by Governor Stassen, will extend to each block and half township. One small phase of the local historical society's task will be the collection of such records of this organization as are available.

The task of collecting the war records for a county is a formidable one, but it is one in which much can be done by a few interested people. War records are divisible into two groups: the correspondence, minutes, membership rolls, financial accounts, and the like, of organizations, which are needed in the transaction of their business and which cannot be obtained until that business is completed; and material which can be collected currently. The first class includes the archives of state and federal agencies which are not available for collection by the local society, because they will be preserved in state or federal archives. Yet, should there be a mem-

ber of a local society who is a camera enthusiast, it might be possible for him to obtain for the local society microfilm copies of much archival material of governmental and national organizations, such as the United Service Organizations. Incidentally, the preservation of other kinds of material through the use of films should not be overlooked. In the second class fall publicity releases, leaflets, pamphlets, posters, badges, instructions to workers, forms of all kinds, such as pledge cards, and many other classes of material. These records can and should be collected currently, for many of them will be lost if they are not collected as they are produced.

By beginning its collecting activities at once, the local society can make contacts that will result later in the acquisition of much valuable material. Every organization has records that it cannot release immediately, but if the officials of an organization know the wants of the local historical society and are kept acquainted with them, it is not improbable that all its records can be obtained when it closes its activities. Thus each war organization in the community should be made aware of the local historical society's desire to obtain its records when it is through with them. It is possible to interest a key person in each organization and to enlist his services in collecting material for the local historical society. Certainly a key person should be seen periodically by someone representing the society and reminded of its desire to preserve material.

The local newspapers will aid in determining which are the important organizations and who are the important people in each. Essential to keeping track of the war activities in the community is the newspaper itself. Furthermore, it is the most important single war record, and its files should be preserved. Read the newspapers with care to determine which are the strategic war organizations. By this I mean that certain organizations will have liaison functions. They will know what other organizations in the community are doing and who is leading their activities. The organizations with general functions are the important ones from the standpoint of collecting. Their officials can help the local society in its collecting activities; they will know what organizations and which people are important.

At present it seems that the Victory Aides will be among the important key persons in the whole defense set-up, for among their duties are learning the general facts of the defense program and activities in the locality, the state, and the nation, calling at all homes within their areas, listing and reporting all families having members in the armed forces, encouraging participation in the war program, and the like.

My purpose has been to indicate some of the possibilities for collecting war records that await the local historical society. The task is an enormous one. It is one that should be started now. It is one in which no one society can hope to obtain completeness. It is one in which much mutual benefit will result from co-operation among the societies of the state. The Minnesota Historical Society alone cannot adequately collect the multitudinous records of war activity that will be produced throughout Minnesota. In that undertaking the state and county historical societies must co-operate.



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