

MINNESOTA HISTORY

VOLUME 30 • PUBLISHED IN DEC. 1949 • NUMBER 4

The Minnesota Historical Society: Highlights of a Century

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MUCH OF THE *present issue* of Minnesota History is devoted to the celebration of October 20, 1949, which marked the Centennial of the Minnesota Historical Society. On that day, however, the accomplishments of Minnesota's oldest institution, its ups and downs during the course of a hundred years, were merely suggested. In order to provide a more complete record of the society's past, to show how the modern institution emerged, and to give its story permanent form, the present history has been prepared for this Centennial issue of its quarterly. The narrative is based in large part on the annual reports of the society, on the minutes of its executive council, on letters and documents in its archives, and on items in contemporary newspapers. Ed.

"THERE IS NOTHING too flattering to predict of the future greatness and prosperity of a people who commence to write their history as soon as the foundations of their commonwealth are laid." That was the comment of James Watson Webb, written a century ago in his *Morning Courier and New York Enquirer*. He was referring to the creation of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Minnesota Territory was established on March 3, 1849. Six months later, on September 3, the first territorial legislature assembled in a St. Paul hotel to set up the machinery for the government of the new commonwealth. And the fifth act of that legislature, ap-

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proved on October 20, was the incorporation of the Minnesota Historical Society.

It is not surprising that the establishment of the society was the subject of comment by the New York editor, as well as by other editors throughout the country, for historical societies elsewhere had come only after years of civil development and the emergence of a more mature culture. In fact, the Minnesota Historical Society followed civil organization more quickly than any other historical society in the nation. It came into being in a territory with a white population of perhaps five thousand. The capital city, St. Paul, had fewer than a thousand. Except for the small wedge between the St. Croix and Mississippi rivers, Minnesota still belonged to the Indians. This was scarcely the traditional setting for a historical society, and the Reverend Edward D. Neill gave voice to it in his address at the society's first annual meeting: "You have been organized at a most favorable period," he said. "On the bluff where we are assembled, there are temples of religion and education . . . yet around us, the skin-lodges of the Dakotas are still visible. Our nearest village [*Kaposia*] is the residence of the band [of Dakota] that was here a century ago. . . . The scalp-dance is yet enacted within our hearing, and not a year rolls by, but the soil of Minnesota is reddened with Ojibwa and Dakota blood."

In such an environment few historical societies could have existed. Yet it is no paradox that the Minnesota Historical Society not only existed but prospered. The reason is clear: the men who founded it and guided it during the first few decades of its life were the makers of Minnesota itself. They were laboring hard to wrest civil order out of the wild scramble of settlers who were arriving daily by wagon and river boat. They were the leaders in many and various civil enterprises, and they wanted the cultural as well as the material to be represented. They took a warm pride in making the growth of the society a part of the development of the territory and the state. Moreover, these men knew that they were making history, and they wanted their part in it perpetuated. They well understood that this could be accomplished only by the creation of

an institution that would record and safeguard the materials of that history, even while it was being made.

Governor Alexander Ramsey paved the way for the creation of the society in his first message to the territorial legislature. Rising before the pioneer lawmakers to deliver his message, the able young governor — he was then only thirty-four — indicated that they were about to write the first lines in what would become a historic chapter in the annals of the United States. Since newspapers, which he called the “day-books of history,” gave a relatively complete picture of the history these men and their times were making, he recommended that every newspaper published in the territory be saved. He was convinced that “the preservation by a community, of materials for the composition of its history, when a future time shall require it to be written, is a task not without its uses; and, when early commenced, easily accomplished.” Because the society’s founders saw the wisdom of Ramsey’s advice and acted upon it, present-day readers in the newspaper room of the Historical Building may find everything from the original issue of the territory’s first newspaper, the *Minnesota Pioneer*, to today’s editions just off the newsstand.

While Ramsey’s advice doubtless put the pioneer legislators in a receptive frame of mind when the bill for the society’s incorporation was placed before them, credit for the society’s inception must be given to Charles K. Smith, a native of Ohio and the first secretary of Minnesota Territory. According to William G. Le Duc, Smith had come under the influence of the Ohio antiquarian and historian, Caleb Atwater. “I speak from personal knowledge of the influence of Mr. Atwater’s books and lectures on the youth of that period,” wrote Le Duc. “We were all antiquarians, collectors, and historical society boys,” and Smith was “indoctrinated with the historical fervor which manifested itself later in the southeast corner room of Robert Kennedy’s log tavern on Bench Street, St. Paul,” where he had his office as territorial secretary.

Unfortunately, Smith has received more blame than acclaim in the annals of Minnesota. Irascible and arrogant, he made many ene-

mies and few friends in the new territory. It was of Smith, upon his departure from Minnesota in 1851, that the newspaper editor, James M. Goodhue, made the much-quoted remark: "Secretary Smith had stolen *into* the Territory, and stolen *in* the Territory, and would in the end, steal *out* of the Territory, with whatever plunder he could abstract from it."

Smith drew up the act to incorporate the society. In it he named as incorporators himself and eighteen of the most influential and distinguished men in the territory, neglecting, in characteristic fashion, to consult the eighteen. Among them were the practical statesman, Alexander Ramsey; Henry H. Sibley, then delegate to Congress; the chief justice and two associate justices of the territorial Supreme Court; the United States marshal of Minnesota; Henry M. Rice, like Sibley, an influential fur trader and later delegate to Congress; and many others prominent in the affairs of the young territory.

On November 15, 1849, a few weeks after the society's charter was enacted, a majority of the incorporators met, each apparently pleased that Smith had thought to list him. They formally organized the society by electing officers, with Governor Ramsey as president and Smith as secretary, and by appointing a committee to draw up a constitution and bylaws.



The legislature may have broken tradition when it created the society so soon after the organization of civil government, but certainly there was no cause for regret over hasty action, because the society from the beginning made itself an integral part of the territorial milieu. Like a young oak, it flourished when the economy that sustained it was good; when times were bad, and there was little or no sustenance, it rested or developed more slowly. But mostly it grew; and when it could not exactly flourish, it grew anyhow, in a steady process of garnering the raw materials of history.

Small and homeless as it was, the society nevertheless was active from the first. On New Year's Day of 1850, some six weeks after its organization, it held its first annual meeting in the Methodist

Church in St. Paul. There Neill delivered his address on the French explorers of the seventeenth century. At its close he exhorted the little group of members to prosecute "the objects for which the Society was incorporated, with vigor. 'Write your history as you go along,' and you will confer a favor upon the future inhabitants of Minnesota, for which they will be ever grateful." Neill, independent and progressive, a cultivated man of letters, devoted his long life to the cause of religion and education in Minnesota. He was the first Presbyterian minister in St. Paul, and later he became the state's superintendent of public instruction and chancellor of the university, and the founder and president of Macalester College. In 1851, at the age of twenty-seven, he became secretary of the Minnesota Historical Society. It was he who laid the foundations for the society's distinguished record of collecting, and it was he who wrote the first authentic history of the state, published in 1882.

Vision and purpose were both implicit in Governor Ramsey's "Salutatory Address" given at the second annual meeting. "It may seem a strange thing," he said, "even to some of our own citizens, and still stranger to people elsewhere, that a *Historical Society* should have been formed in this Territory . . . when the wilderness was as it is yet, around us, when the smoke of Indian lodges still intercepted our view of the horizon." Nevertheless, he insisted that "institutions like ours elevate the character of our young Territory in the eyes of friends abroad, and in the estimation of men of character and science, more than would the golden sands of California, if we possessed them. Let us not forfeit their good opinion by either becoming discouraged in the path we have marked out, or neglecting to do all in our power to *work* out the plan under which we are associated."

Undoubtedly the society took sustenance from these inspiring and reassuring words. Both Neill and Ramsey, as leaders of the society, knew what they wanted, but they also knew what was possible. They chose a reasonable goal, and before they died (Neill in 1893 and Ramsey in 1903) they saw the society grow well within the orbit of what was practical, in terms of economy as well as public

interest. Starting with a membership of fewer than a hundred, enrollment never exceeded three hundred during the nineteenth century. This small group of devoted friends and officers met at varying intervals, in what they were pleased to call "conversational meetings." One of the earliest of these meetings is described by Dr. Thomas R. Potts in a letter written to Sibley in 1851: "Gov. Ramsey the Pres. delivered a very pretty address and McLeod and Becker read papers from Mr. Riggs and Schoolcraft. Judge Smith had a long and elaborate report prepared, which he read,—as the old woman did the bible,—in detached passages. It caused a good deal of mirth, but is on the whole a faithful history of Minnesota since its organisation. The whole proceedings will be published in book form." The "book form" of the proceedings came out as the *Annals* of the society, which were published annually for a few years and were later incorporated in the series of *Collections*. Aside from a few notable volumes, these consisted of miscellaneous reminiscences and papers read at meetings. Collections grew, haphazardly at first, and later with more systematic planning. With certain happy but irregular exceptions, such activities constituted the character of the Minnesota Historical Society up to the period of the First World War.

Although the society has not at any time claimed as members all its friends, it has never met with failure in rallying their enthusiastic support when needed. An example occurred in 1851, when the new organization wanted to publish an ambitious volume. This venture proved to be one of those happy but irregular exceptions in the society's program, which, like others that were to follow, brought distinction to the institution. Foreseeing the insuperable financial barriers to publication, the society raised the necessary funds by selling subscriptions in advance. The book was the large *Grammar and Dictionary of the Dakota Language*, compiled by four missionaries to the Sioux, Stephen R. Riggs, Samuel and Gideon Pond, and Dr. Thomas S. Williamson. The work proved to be an important contribution to Indian philology, and the Smithsonian Institution made it the fourth volume of its *Contributions to Knowledge* series.



During these early years the society could claim no headquarters. Its modest requirements were filled first by the territorial secretary's office, and later by hotel rooms and store lofts. In 1855 Minnesota experienced a sudden and rapid development, generated by an amazing influx of new settlers, an upsurge of business enterprise, and general optimism and excitement in the atmosphere itself. The sudden boom had its effect on the society. A room in the Capitol was set aside for its use; the legislature passed two important acts affecting its status; and, finally, its officers determined to capitalize on the easy money of the time by soliciting funds for the construction of its own building.

The legislature of 1856 was indulgent toward the society. It passed an amendment to the 1849 charter raising the five-thousand-dollar limit on the amount of property the society might own by permitting it to receive and hold property in any amount. Further, the amendment exempted the society from taxation and broadened its purpose. The 1849 charter had stated the purpose as the "preservation of a Library, Mineralogical and Geological specimens, Indian curiosities and other matters and things connected with, and calculated to illustrate and perpetuate the history and settlement of said Territory." The 1856 amendment restated the purpose thus: "In addition to the collection and preservation of publications, manuscripts, antiquities, curiosities, and other things pertaining to the social, political and natural history of Minnesota, to cultivate among the citizens thereof a knowledge of the useful and liberal arts, science, and literature." The key is in the words "to cultivate," which opened the way for the development of the institution into one primarily educational, rather than purely antiquarian. It was not until the time of the First World War, however, that the society was able to assume its educational mission seriously; and therefore the 1856 legislature, as is so frequently the case, showed more inclination to lay down a sweeping formula than to appropriate funds to implement it. Nevertheless, the amendment is interesting because it shows that the lawmakers wanted an institution of greater scope than that originally planned, and, having enlarged the society's re-

sponsibilities, they provided also for a governing executive council of twenty-five members, which was later enlarged to thirty. The same legislature passed a joint resolution for an annual grant of five hundred dollars toward the support of the society.



To a great extent the expansion of the society during the early period was due to Daniel A. Robertson. This vigorous, public-spirited man came to St. Paul in 1850, founded the *Minnesota Democrat*, built up an extensive private library, and took an active interest in education and in the encouragement of cultural institutions. In 1855, as chairman of a building committee, he seems to have been the leading spirit in a movement toward the erection of the society's own building. In November of that year he reported for his committee that two lots at the corner of Tenth and Wabasha streets could be purchased for fifteen hundred dollars, and that he had already begun to raise the necessary money by selling life memberships. In December he announced that prospects were good for raising the amount needed not only for the site, but for the building as well. As Secretary Neill recorded it, the building was conceived by Robertson as "an edifice convenient for the Society and creditable to their enterprise." By the middle of January, 1856, Robertson was reporting that he had raised fifteen hundred dollars by selling sixty-two life memberships at twenty-five dollars each. Further than that, he felt that the committee's success "seems to warrant the conviction that a sufficient sum can be raised to commence the erection of the proposed Society Building next spring, and to finish it in the course of two years, in a style alike creditable to the liberality of our citizens, the Society, and" — a month having elapsed since his last ebullient report — "the Territory" itself.

Promotion and money collecting were in the air; the future of the society was rife with promise practically fulfilled. Plans were made for laying the cornerstone of the "new hall" with appropriate ceremony. The railroad and steamboat companies between St. Paul and distant points were asked to "co-operate" by furnishing tickets for scientific and literary guests. The invitations, which the society

sent to many of the nation's most celebrated people, read in part: "Upon accepting this invitation, passage tickets, per railroad, and Steam Boat, to and from St. Paul will be sent you, and during your sojourn here, our members will be happy to provide you with the best and most welcome quarters that our Frontier City affords."

The gala day, June 24, 1856, arrived. The occasion, said the St. Paul *Pioneer and Democrat*, "attracted to our city a large number of strangers from different portions of Minnesota and the Western and Eastern States. Twelve or fifteen steamers arrived at our levee on Monday, and Tuesday morning, and all of them brought to St. Paul a large number of passengers." There was, of course, a parade, and, according to the *Minnesotian*, "the city was astir early, and in full tune for the movement of the procession." According to the *Pioneer* account, the parade, "when full, was at least half a mile in length," with a "Battery of Flying Artillery" at the head. Then followed the Pioneer Hook and Ladder Company, their truck "painted handsomely, decorated in fine style, and drawn by six cream colored horses, led by grooms." Others represented in the procession were German societies and Masonic lodges. The guests rode in carriages, and members of the historical society, apparently afoot and wearing badges, brought up the rear. The cornerstone was laid with Masonic ceremony, and the mayor of St. Paul gave an address. That evening there was a dinner at the Winslow House, with seven speakers and music by the singing Hutchinsons. It was reported in the *Pioneer and Democrat* as "the grandest gala day in the history of our city."

Two weeks later the society's treasurer informed the executive council that the building committee was out of funds, and that money was needed to provide for the protection of the foundation from the winter frosts. A resolution was passed to assess each annual member five dollars, the treasurer to "collect the same in the way the most expedient." Having disposed of that much of the problem, the council members were ready to consider the type of building to be erected on the foundation. Accordingly, they resolved that Judge Daly, a correspondent of the society in New York, be furnished with a profile of the ground plan and requested to hire an architect to draft the superstructure, which should cost not more than fifteen

thousand dollars. Thus did the inflation-mad little frontier historical society build for the future. Awaiting the outcome of some unknown architect's dream of the kind of building it should have, it hastily protected the foundation from the frost—incurring a debt of a hundred dollars in the process—and there the work ceased.

About that time the officers and members of the society began to wonder whether they might have acted with too little deliberation. Encouraged by the financial boom and easy money, they had counted on imminent prosperity to guarantee donations for their building. With pomp and ceremony they had laid the cornerstone for a building, without a cent to build it and without a notion of its size or design. Their enthusiastic but ill-considered action, however, probably caused less amazement in those rambunctious days than it would now.

It was only a few months after the cornerstone laying that the panic of 1857 fell upon the frontier and its optimistic historians. Eastern bankers called their loans, Minnesotans learned that there was little money or credit to draw upon, and land became valueless. As Folwell put it, "thousands who had believed themselves wealthy soon found themselves in actual bodily need. . . . The floating population of speculators began to look for other scenes of operation and left the cities and towns none the worse for a numerous exodus."

The society, already in debt, felt the effect of the panic at once. In fact, the panic was only one of a prolonged series of calamities that plagued the institution during the next few years. In the summer of 1857 the Capitol caught fire and was almost destroyed. Although volunteers rushed in to rescue whatever they could grab, some of the society's collections were lost. But the organization bravely continued its regular work. In January, 1858, William H. Kelley was appointed "actuary." Under that pretentious title he arranged and classified the collections, and within two years nearly doubled their number, especially in maps and "cabinet" objects. But these days of promising growth were short-lived, because the financial stringency caused a rapid decrease in members and the termination of state appropriations. Since even Kelley's minute salary of

four hundred dollars a year could not be paid, he resigned and left the society without so much as an "actuary."

Despite fire and lack of members, money, and leadership, the process of collecting—instinct itself to a historical society—went on unabated. At the annual meeting of 1860, Governor Ramsey reported that the society had "accomplished an enviable work for the State. . . . While in 1850 it had no data of interest, in 1860 the Society finds itself in possession of . . . material for a history as complete as any of the North Western States." And Neill added his usual note of inspiration: "Now that the fever of speculation has subsided, there is reason to hope that the increased leisure of our citizens in various localities of the State will lead them to devote more attention to the gathering of material which will tend to preserve a knowledge of the aborigines, and hand down the names of the early settlers, with a history of their trials, successes and adventures."

But these were words only, and something more than words was needed. After a meeting early in 1861, none was held for three years. In this period came one of the worst blows of all—the society lost its rooms in the Capitol and had to store its collections. Moreover, the Civil War called many of its leaders from the state—including Neill. A report written later documents the paralysis that had set in: "The Society has been in a very quiet condition since the Rev. Mr. Neill accepted the position of Chaplain to the First Minnesota Regiment. His resignation at that time from the office of Secretary, seemed to extract the life from the Society; the contributing members lost their zeal, and the few active members were compelled to stop all expenses except those that were absolutely essential."

By 1864, however, there were definite signs of recovery. In that year the legislature renewed its annual appropriation, membership increased substantially, rooms were rented in a building in downtown St. Paul, and once more regular meetings were held. The inadequacy of the rooms for the society's purposes, however, as well as the doubtful quality of the objects collected, are revealed in the secretary's report of that year: "A finely preserved Eagle has been presented. . . . For the want of a suitable place to display it in our

overcrowded room, the noble bird is perched upon the Speaker's desk of the First Territorial Legislature of Minnesota. The bones of the Mastodon seem ready to rise from their lethargy at the desecration; and the Shovel-nosed Sturgeon, suspended from the ceiling, with gaping mouth looks on in mute astonishment; while the Eagle, with wings widely spread and head poised towards Ingersoll's Block, seems prepared to leave his temporary perch for a more appropriate position." Another gift, which illustrates the antiquarianism of the period, was a "rebel skull" presented to the historians at St. Paul and labeled "a trophy for the brave heroes of the bloody field of Fort Donaldson, and a prize for the loyal; let it ever be a *pall* to the *Traitor*, and a *warning* to all."



The appointment of J. Fletcher Williams as secretary in 1867 marked the beginning of a period of intensive growth in the society. A graduate of Ohio Wesleyan University, Williams had come in 1855 to St. Paul, where he was employed on a newspaper. When he became secretary of the society he was thirty-three years old. For two years he received no compensation for his services, and so could devote to the society only the free time that his duties as a newspaper reporter permitted. Temporarily, at least, the society found some advantage in this arrangement, for the council minutes explain that Williams' duties as a reporter "led him to visit and converse with many persons daily, and gave him thus an excellent opportunity to press the claims of the society, to increase its membership, to solicit gifts for it, and to keep its objects prominently before the public by frequent mention in the daily journals."

How much Williams was able to accomplish for the society even on a part-time basis is apparent in his report for 1867. "Never," he wrote, "during any previous year of the Society, have we made such rapid, solid, and substantial progress as this year. Indeed, in some respects, we have accomplished more than in all the previous career of the Society. Our members have largely increased; our library and cabinet have almost doubled; our exchange list has been enlarged and made to yield us valuable returns; our finances have been

greatly improved; our list of correspondents and donors more than trebled; an interest and pride awakened in the Society among all classes of our citizens; our effectiveness greatly increased by means of standing committees, who have been appointed for the first time this year; through the repeated publication of our proceedings by the press of the state, the name of the Historical Society has become familiar to all our citizens, where a few months ago it was almost unknown; while our meetings, once slimly attended and frequently without a quorum, are now too large for our limited rooms to accommodate."

On May Day of that same year, 1867, the society celebrated the centenary of Jonathan Carver's treaty with the Sioux in the "Great Cave," since known as "Carver's Cave." In the afternoon the historians made a pilgrimage to the cave and explored it by the light of lanterns and candles, their songs and laughter echoing from the hollow recesses as they crossed the interior lake by boat. They held a meeting in the society's rooms in the evening, with formal addresses, followed by another of those "conversational meetings" which the members, according to the reports, so thoroughly enjoyed. "The Society then adjourned," concludes the *Pioneer* account, "as one of the members drily remarked, 'until the bicentenary of Carver's Treaty.' When that event occurs, the Historical Society may be able to celebrate it with more elaborateness and style, but certainly not in a manner more pleasant to all concerned than the centenary celebration yesterday." Such celebrations of historic anniversaries—and there have been several in the past century—have been delegated to the Minnesota Historical Society as the appropriate agent of the citizens of the state. They have done much to increase interest in the society's work.

In 1868 the society moved into new rooms in the Capitol. They were, as usual, basement rooms; nevertheless, the secretary recorded with pride that one was "24 by 48 feet in size, with an 11 foot ceiling, well lit by four large windows, and in every way pleasant and commodious. . . . Another room, attached to it, has been plainly shelved off for the storage of our public documents, unbound books, and newspapers. Thus the probable increase of our Library for several years to come is provided with accommodations." But just one

THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Again begs leave to call the attention of its members and friends, to the importance of saving and collecting for it

Every Thing of a Printed Nature,

which they do not care to preserve, such as pamphlets of all kinds, documents, reports of institutions, catalogues, magazines, religious or political addresses and essays, almanacs, old city directories, and all other publications of that ephemeral nature, such as are usually

Thrown into the Waste Basket,

or cast aside and got rid of, as of no value. Most, if not all such publications, (especially those relating to this State,) although not prized now, will become very scarce in a few years, and valuable for many reasons, if preserved in the manner we are trying to do, classified and bound,

And Kept for Reference and Use.

We therefore request our friends to save and send us every thing of this kind which they can spare, or (if in the city) notify us that the same are at our disposal, and they will be sent for.

J. F. WILLIAMS,
Librarian.

year later Williams was singing what must ever be the old refrain of a historical society, but which we find creeping into the record almost too soon to be credible: "Already our rooms are becoming crowded, and more space would be desirable now."

A year later the legislature passed an act establishing the society as a free public library and appropriating two thousand dollars for the "better support and usefulness" of the institution. The increased appropriation provided a salary for Williams, who abandoned his newspaper career to give his full time to the society as its secretary and librarian.

Williams, able, studious, and industrious, devoted all but a few months of the remaining twenty-four years of his life to the society. A suggestion of the man's personality is found in a sketch by one of his contemporaries: "He is small, polite, obliging, industrious, and is a walking encyclopedia of the dead past. He is like a singed cat, a good deal better than he looks, especially so in his line of duty as secretary. When gazing at or conversing with you his mind seems to be wandering amid the pyramids of Egypt, and yet he responds with alacrity to the requests made upon him. He is exceedingly cautious, politic, and on certain subjects, though he may talk a great deal, says but very little, while upon other subjects he becomes quite loquacious and quite frank. He is a man of ability, unpretentious, upright, studious, and is very valuable as secretary of the Historical Society."

The society's devotees may well have taken pride in their energetic librarian and his program for development. A year after his appointment on a full-time basis he was able to report: "Since April 1, they [*the society's rooms*] have been constantly open, and our Librarian has been in attendance during the usual business hours about the Capitol. Several thousand visitors have been received since that time, the Library catalogued, arranged, and put in order, the pamphlets arranged in volumes, and our large collection of newspapers assorted and prepared for binding."

Williams was putting other things in the record. In his report for 1869, he urged the need for an endowment. "A systematic effort," he wrote, "contemplating years of unremitting attention, should be

commenced and persistently kept up" to secure a large endowment. "There are hundreds of men of means in our community," he continued, "not members of our Society, yet who should also esteem it a privilege to provide by legacy, for the gift of a portion of their means in the endowment of an institution like this. . . . How better than this can any leave a monument to his memory, 'more enduring than brass?'" It was a convincing appeal, but, buried in his report, it probably attracted little attention. But if he did not reach wealthy nonmembers, who, he hoped, might bequeath large sums to the society, Williams and the other officers did succeed in selling life memberships to swell the "permanent fund," now known as the "invested funds." The principal of these funds was "irrevocably pledged to remain undiminished," and for many years the interest from investments was added to the funds.

As Williams saw it, the society had three functions: collecting, preserving, and publishing. Of the three, he considered publishing as "perhaps the least valuable." Nevertheless, during his period of service a catalogue of the library and six volumes of the *Minnesota Historical Collections*, including his own *History of the City of Saint Paul*, were published. While today the society is composed of twelve different departments, each with a staff, in Williams' day there was no such division of activities. Throughout most of his regime he carried on the work of the society alone, for not until 1888 did he have an assistant. The library included newspapers, manuscripts, and pictures, as well as books. The museum, or "cabinet of curiosities," seems to have been his least concern, and he devoted most of his attention to the library. In 1872 he visited "nearly fifty of the best public libraries in the United States," studying in each its "economy and modes of management." The best of their methods he adopted for the society.

Soon after he came to the society, Williams defined a policy of systematic collecting for the library, to include all works relating to Minnesota, books on the Northwest and the West and on general American history and biography, and bibliographical and reference works. This policy resulted in a valuable and fairly comprehensive collection of Americana, with special emphasis on Minnesota. As

early as 1869 the genealogical collection began to assume importance, and by 1895 it ranked among the three or four leading collections of genealogy in the nation. Before Williams became librarian, practically all the collections were donated, but during his administration books were purchased in increasing numbers. In 1867 seventy-three dollars were spent for books; two decades later, in 1887, the amount was twenty-seven hundred dollars. Nevertheless, gifts still greatly outnumbered purchases. In fact, during the entire period of the society's existence, the percentage of gifts has always been higher than that of purchases; as late as 1948 the proportion of gifts to the library was seventy-five per cent.

The library in 1889 had more than forty thousand books and some fifteen hundred bound volumes of newspapers. By 1893 Williams had built it up to such an extent that he could boast that "the people regard this society as the fountain and treasury of every fact relating to Minnesota. . . . And they are seldom sent away empty-handed." This growth, while a source of pride, was likewise a source of complaint on the part of the librarian. "Of course," he wrote, "this keeping a general depository of knowledge, added to the multifarious details of a librarian's duties, taxes the time to a great degree. And a good modicum of his time is consumed in entertaining visitors, who do not want anything in particular, but who consume about so much time, nevertheless. The librarian has often remarked that a very useful and quite indispensable official of the library, would be one whose sole duty would be to 'entertain bores.'"

Manuscripts were not neglected during this period. Some valuable collections were received as gifts, including the priceless Taliaferro Papers and some Washington and Lincoln items. In 1872 Williams advertised, through newspapers and by means of circulars, for written statements "from our old pioneers and early settlers . . . of their own personal adventures and experiences in the early settlement of Minnesota, and other reminiscences of the pioneer days of our State." He reported the results as most gratifying. Many of the documents obtained represented information nowhere else on record. Williams looked forward to the use of this material for a future history of Minnesota, and to the continuation of his efforts "until

our record and account of the first settlement of every county and town in the State is complete."



Though his work on behalf of the society generally progressed with smoothness and the results usually were gratifying, Williams' administration was not without a discordant note. Late in 1876 the executive council was asked to consider whether the two St. Paul lots purchased for the society in 1856 should be utilized to produce income. Judge Aaron Goodrich, one of the original corporators of the society, moved that the lots should remain unoccupied, as they had during the past twenty years. A councilor who was not one of the founding group, General John B. Sanborn, offered a substitute resolution, directing the society's officers to manage the lots so as to yield an income. His resolution carried by a vote of seven to three.

At the next council meeting, Goodrich was ready with a new resolution. It provided that Sanborn's resolution be expunged from the record, because it was "adopted in violation of the laws" of the society. When the Goodrich resolution was voted down ten to four, there began what Williams reported as the "unpleasantness" which divided the society's members into two factions and ended in the state Supreme Court. As his belligerency "ripened into open rebellion," Goodrich "plied his seductive wiles among the staid, conservative members" of the council, building up a faction which included seven of the eight surviving corporators. They took the position that the society's charter "is an executed contract between the state and the corporators named therein"; that "its trustees were named in the charter, and were invested thereby with the power of perpetuating themselves; and that "they cannot add to their number." The amendatory act of 1856, which increased the number of councilors, or "trustees," from nineteen to twenty-five, they therefore declared "unconstitutional and void." Thus, claimed Goodrich and his supporters, the eight surviving corporators and the duly elected successors of the eleven deceased founders "alone constituted the Minnesota Historical Society."

Such men as Sibley, Neill, and Robertson joined General San-

born in the position that the society's original charter gave the "right to admit new members at pleasure, for every such [private] corporation possesses that incidental power when not restrained by its charter, and the charter in this instance contains no such restriction." Furthermore, they maintained that, on March 21, 1856, the amendatory act of that year was accepted at a special meeting, and "twenty-five gentlemen, including several of the corporators named in the act of 1849, were elected" to the council. Since the amendatory act of 1856 had been accepted without qualification, members of the Sanborn faction claimed that the original charter contemplated "a membership comprising the grantees named in the charter, their associates, and the successors of both of these classes, instead of the successors of the original grantees alone." In their opinion, the 1856 act was valid.

The newspapers made the most of the schism and some members contributed to the publicity by writing articles themselves. Each group called itself the "Minnesota Historical Society" and went its separate way until the legislature met in 1878. When the appropriation came up for consideration, the legislature had to know which group should receive the money. It ordered a hearing before the Supreme Court. The question, submitted to the court in the form of a *quo warranto* directed to the corporators, was argued by both sides, and on January 11, 1879, the court handed down its decision. To the disappointment of the Goodrich faction, the court ruled that the original organization of 1849 was the legally constituted body, and that the act of 1856 was entirely efficacious. The appropriation was given to the permanent organization. Rather than spend state funds to pay court costs, members subscribed enough money privately to defray all expenses; and Williams reported that the work of the society had not been "retarded in any manner."



The need for a fireproof building to house the society's growing collections and to guarantee their safety was frequently reiterated by Williams in his reports. The increase in size of the library, he cautioned, "increases the danger and the loss, if destroyed." Again,

he wrote that fire was "frequently predicted and always feared." An attempt was made to obtain a building in 1878, when a committee was appointed to draft a bill for a legislative appropriation of thirty-five thousand dollars to help defray the costs of its construction. Another committee was appointed to solicit subscriptions for the same purpose, conditional on the passage of the bill. Although nearly fifteen thousand dollars were privately subscribed, the project had to be abandoned because the legislature took no action.

In 1881 the fears of the society's officers were realized. Let Williams tell the story: "On March 1, 1881, at nine o'clock P.M., the fatal hour came! The capitol was found to be on fire in the dome. Both houses of legislature were in session and a large crowd of spectators in attendance. Vigorous efforts were made at once by the latter to save the valuable library of the Historical Society. The doors and windows leading to the society's apartments were thrown open, and soon two or three score of men were busily engaged in carrying out armfuls of books and depositing them on the seats of the Universalist church near by."

While most of the library was saved, the fire did result in the loss of several thousands of books, pamphlets, and newspaper volumes. Under the circumstances of the haphazard rescue efforts, it is surprising that the loss was so small. The society's files contain an interesting letter on these efforts from H. L. Hinckley of White Bear Lake, who wrote to Williams the next day: "During the progress of the fire, last evening, I saw a number of the books of the Historical Society piled on Wabasha Street, and not knowing what damage might happen them in the confusion, ventured to move some of them into a dwelling house near by. . . . You may be glad to be enabled to account for the following," and he listed several of the most valuable items now in the society's possession. Hinckley went on to say that he had "hastily filled a basket with a selection which I believed to be among the most valuable which I saw. I wish I could have done more. We shall all congratulate ourselves that so little was lost. I hardly realized before how many good friends the Society had."

Williams deplored the "almost total destruction of our really fine

and valuable cabinet of curiosities. . . . All our gatherings for thirty years were lost." Opinion might well differ on the loss of the "cabinet of curiosities." In a sense, the loss was a blessing, when one contemplates the value to Minnesota of a box of weapons and other objects "illustrating domestic life in Polynesia," a fragment of the boiler of a steamboat that exploded in 1864, a knot of a tree shaped like a human face, a piece of oak with a deer's head imbedded in it, a bird's nest made partly of newspaper, and a watch chain made from the hair of an Indian hanged at Mankato in 1862.

St. Paul's newly finished market house furnished temporary quarters for the society after the fire. The library was moved into it, and in a few weeks "all was running smoothly." When the new Capitol building was completed, two years later, the society once more took up basement quarters under its dome.

One of the society's most important services to the people of Minnesota during Williams' administration was the establishment of Itasca State Park in 1890. In 1888 Jacob V. Brower proposed to undertake a topographical and hydrographical survey of the Itasca basin, at his own expense, provided the society would give him a commission for the purpose. The commission was readily granted, and the next year Brower organized a party of engineers and proceeded to make the survey. Two years later the society memorialized the legislature to establish a state park in the basin, and the legislature acted at once. The park, which now consists of 31,816 acres, includes the source of the Mississippi, and preserves for posterity almost the only large stand of virgin timber left in Minnesota.

In 1893 Williams' health failed and he resigned. He died before the end of the year. During his quarter century of service, he had seen the society—little more than a name when he entered its service—take an enduring place in the life of the state, its usefulness established and unquestioned. He was succeeded in 1895, after an interval of temporary appointments, by Warren Upham.



Upham was a geologist who had made a name for himself as one of Minnesota's most distinguished scientists. A native of New

Hampshire and a graduate of Dartmouth, he had come to Minnesota in 1879 to assist Newton H. Winchell, the state geologist, in the Minnesota Geological Survey. Vigorous and only twenty-nine, he devoted himself to the project. He later estimated that, during three of the eight years of his investigations, he had traveled eleven thousand miles by horse and had averaged twenty-five miles a day. The results of his geological explorations are recorded in numerous periodicals of the time, both in America and abroad, and in several impressive volumes, one of which, *The Glacial Lake Agassiz*, has been called "a classic on the subject of postglacial physiography." In 1895, at the age of forty-five, when he had reached the pinnacle of his career as a geologist, he suddenly changed his field of work to become librarian of the Western Reserve Historical Society at Cleveland. There he stayed but a few months. His many friends in Minnesota had not forgotten him, and they wanted him to return.

Upham took over his new duties with the Minnesota Historical Society in November, 1895, and he remained in Minnesota the rest of his life, as secretary and librarian of the society until 1914, and as its archaeologist from that date until his retirement in 1933. Although he continued to contribute articles in the field of geology until 1905, his new duties caused a shift of interest to archaeology and history. Less aggressive than Williams, he was more deeply interested in study and writing. He edited five volumes of the society's *Collections*, some of which contain his own contributions. Two other volumes, *Minnesota Biographies* and *Minnesota Geographic Names*, which are probably the most useful in the series, appeared under his authorship. The one, Folwell characterized as "a most admirable and convenient Minnesota 'Who's Who,'" and the other, as "an equally admirable 'There's Where.'" Upham was also one of the editors of the four-volume *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, the first volume of which he wrote.

A contemporary described Upham as "courtly, modest, unobtrusive, almost retiring until his own field was mentioned; he then became alert, authoritative and entertaining. He was endeared to all his associates by his modesty regarding his own attainments, his thoughtfulness for others and his willingness to give without stint

both his time and his knowledge." Like Williams, Upham was more interested in the steady growth of the library than in promoting the society's service to the public. During his regime the library grew from 56,537 volumes to nearly twice that number; legislative appropriations were increased from \$6,000 to \$20,000 annually; the staff was augmented by ten persons; and the society's dream of a building of its own neared realization.



To understand fully how the Historical Building became a reality and how the modern society emerged, one must look back to the era of the pioneers, in which both have their roots. Pioneers are dramatic makers of history. The pioneer settlers of Minnesota were conscious of that fact, and to them a historical society, as a collector and preserver of their history, was a practical thing. Most of them, however, were too preoccupied with the strain of making history to collect it themselves. Certainly they had no real need for it in their daily living. They were content that a minority of their number had the time and the interest to devote some attention to the serious aspects of collecting and preserving what to them was casual daily circumstance. Only in old age did they enjoy ruminating over the past and the special part they and their friends had taken in it.

This attitude was reflected in the society's development up to the end of the Civil War. Wars commonly rekindle interest in history, and the Civil War was no exception to that truism, which partly explains the reawakening of the society during Williams' regime. Moreover, new sources of wealth, a rising standard of living, more leisure, and a higher regard for education during the post-Civil-War period contributed to the increasing interest in the society and its work. That interest, however, was limited by a number of circumstances, among them chiefly the fact that the Minnesota Historical Society was dealing no longer with pioneers, but with new immigrants who could have no interest in a historical society in a region they regarded as too new to have any history, and with the generation of native Minnesotans who were the children of pioneers. These children, aware that they faced a new and changing world, may

have had boundless respect for pioneers, but they had little interest in their deeds. Less conscious of making history than their fathers had been, they cared little about its preservation.

Not long after the turn of the century, a third generation began to make itself felt. Rooted in the state, with the stability of two generations behind them, these grandchildren of pioneers became aware of the backgrounds of their environment. Their grandparents' tales of pioneer experiences were exciting. They began to collect whatever remnants they could of that bygone time. A historical society was not only practical to them; it was mildly exciting. They not only read history, but they got busy and wrote what they called "the new history." Genealogy, antiques, daguerreotypes and ambrotypes, old newspapers, and, above all, manuscripts were sources of an interest more general than the Minnesota Historical Society had ever seen before.

The Minnesota Historical Society needed something new, something to satisfy and nourish this growing interest. This was recognized by Guy Stanton Ford, who became a member of the society in 1913 soon after his appointment as professor of history and dean of the graduate school of the University of Minnesota. After attending a few meetings, Dean Ford realized that the society represented an unfulfilled promise, that it needed a young man of vigor and professional training in history to direct its activities into the program that the people of Minnesota wanted. He presented his ideas to the executive council, which responded enthusiastically to his suggestion that Solon J. Buck, a thirty-year-old assistant professor of history at the state university, be appointed to direct the affairs of the society on a half-time basis. Dr. Buck took over the directorship of the society in the fall of 1914.

Dr. Buck, as Folwell put it, had been trained in the "modern school of American historians," first at the University of Wisconsin and later at Harvard, where he completed work for his Ph.D. He had received inspiration through his association with two of the outstanding historians of the Midwest, Frederick Jackson Turner, under whom he studied in Wisconsin, and Clarence W. Alvord, with whom he worked as research associate at the University of

Illinois. Before Dr. Buck came to the Minnesota society, two books on Midwest history had been published under his name.



Having agitated for a building of its own almost since it was created, the society had made several campaigns since the Civil War to obtain a fireproof home. The Capitol fire of 1881 gave special point to its efforts. But it was not until 1913 that the legislature saw fit to take action. In that year it passed an act, which was amended in 1915, appropriating \$500,000 for the erection of a fireproof historical building, with the understanding that the society contribute \$75,000 for the purchase of the site and the equipment. The building was completed in 1917, and in December of that year the society began the process of moving its collections from the basement quarters in the present Capitol, which it had occupied for twelve years. The operation was completed on March 1, and the society ended its basement existence forever. Gradually adjusting itself to the beautiful building it still occupies, the society soon felt at home in its unaccustomed grandeur. By the second week of May all was ready for the housewarming, a celebration combined with a meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association. The building was dedicated on the last day of the meeting—the sixtieth anniversary of the admission of Minnesota to the Union.

It was most appropriate, and undoubtedly inspiring, for the new superintendent to have a new building for the inauguration of his program. Not that he had waited until then to engender new life into the society, for he had begun that process immediately after assuming his office. Dr. Buck's accomplishments show that he was as much interested as his predecessors had been in the growth of the society, and much more concerned than they about how it grew. His program, stated briefly, called for comprehensive, but always discriminating, collecting; the use of modern methods in the care and administration of the collections; the dissemination of information about state history through greater use of the collections by the public, through publications, and through broader public service; and the building up of a professionally competent staff. Along with

this, he injected his personal vigor and penetrating mind into all phases of his burgeoning program, so that in the course of a day he was all over the building in a kind of omniscience. A master of detail, he was as absorbed in the care and preservation of manuscripts as he was concerned about the impeccability of each page of proof in the society's publications. Books for the library not only must be chosen judiciously, but must be catalogued without a single mistake. One of his dictums is still quoted by the staff in the catalogue division: "Remember that most other people can make mistakes that are soon forgotten, but yours will last hundreds of years."

To Dr. Buck, sound scholarship was imperative for a historical society, and he set high professional standards for each of the society's functions. He was active in many professional organizations outside the state, and he took a leading part in shaping some of them. His regime marked a revitalization of the society that gave it a national as well as a local reputation.

In keeping with the new awakening, the executive council in 1915 simplified the administration of the society by revising the by-laws. The secretary, as superintendent *ex officio*, was placed in charge of the society's activities, under the direction of an executive committee composed of the president, the secretary, the treasurer, and two other members of the council appointed by the president. This committee, which later included the two vice-presidents, met monthly and was responsible to the executive council of thirty members, plus the six top officers of the state, who were members *ex officio*. The membership was overhauled to provide for three classes of members—annual, sustaining, and life. The next year the council adopted a plan for the use of part of the income from the invested funds for the operation of the society.

Dr. Buck recognized the fact that he had inherited from his predecessors, Williams and Upham especially, a library of unusual scope and character. It had been for many years the very center of the society's activities, and the new superintendent determined that the trend should be continued and strengthened. He felt it necessary, however, to define more clearly the library's acquisition policy in order to avoid the danger of spreading its resources too thinly

over too broad a field. Under his guidance the library concentrated on the collection of books covering all Minnesota material, official and unofficial; all important works in general American history, with emphasis on the upper Mississippi Valley and the Great Lakes region; books of travel in America; books on Scandinavians in the United States; and, finally, publications on state and local history. The library's classification system was changed from the Cutter to that of the Library of Congress. The printed cards obtained from the Library of Congress resulted not only in a saving of time, but also in more uniform and thorough cataloguing. The increasing use of the library by the public is documented by the figures: In 1919, the number of books served to readers was about six thousand, and in ten years this figure had multiplied five times. But the library's services were not restricted to those who came to the Historical Building, for numerous requests for information came by telephone and by mail. These requests have increased through the years until now the staff of the reference division devotes a large part of its time to answering them.

During Dr. Buck's administration the library increased in size from 118,000 volumes to 171,000, and it now has well over 200,000. Of substantial aid in contributing to the high quality of the library was the generous bequest in 1927 of \$25,000 from Herschel V. Jones of Minneapolis. The income from this fund was made available for the purchase of rare books, manuscripts, and other materials relating to Minnesota. A practice begun six years later and continued to the present time—the gifts of genealogical books by Minnesota chapters of various patriotic societies as memorials to certain of their members—has added immeasurably to the library's genealogical resources.

Quick to appreciate the large and valuable manuscript collections, Dr. Buck soon realized that too little use was being made of them. There was need for a planned program for their acquisition, for their care and arrangement, and for their ready accessibility. A remarkably high percentage of Minnesotans active in political and business affairs, or their descendants, had made gifts of their papers. The first large collection was received in 1868—the journals and

other papers of Lawrence Taliaferro. Other donors were Franklin Steele, Alexander Ramsey, John H. Stevens, the Pond brothers, Philander Prescott, Hazen Mooers, William T. Boutwell, George Stuntz, and Edward D. Neill. In 1893 the society received the huge Sibley collection, and in 1914, the even more extensive Donnelly Papers. In the earlier period emphasis had been placed on reminiscences, particularly on those that could be published. Dr. Buck inaugurated a program for collecting manuscripts by analyzing the collections and attempting systematically to secure manuscripts that would fill in neglected periods and phases of Minnesota history. The success of these efforts was soon apparent. The accessions for 1920 were over thirty per cent more in bulk than those of 1919, which had been larger than those of any previous year. Professional and modern methods of preserving, classifying, and cataloguing manuscripts also were instituted. While the collections increased steadily, their distinction grew proportionately, and they have attracted scholars from many parts of the United States, and even from abroad.

Hoping that he could "build up a real historical museum, consisting not of mere curiosities and associated items, but rather of articles carefully selected and arranged to illustrate life and conditions in Minnesota at successive periods of its history," Dr. Buck stirred up the dust in the "cabinet," which he put on an efficient and intelligible basis. He started in at the bottom of the problem by making a "new and complete record of the entire museum collection," describing each item in an accession book. In 1917 the first in a series of bimonthly children's hours was held, with eighty-seven children attending.

In 1915 the first issue of the quarterly magazine, originally known as the *Minnesota History Bulletin*, appeared. It was founded primarily to keep members informed of the society's work, to review significant books, and to publish papers and documents formerly printed in the *Collections*. As the years went by, more good articles were submitted for the magazine than could be published, and eventually the contents of some issues were composed chiefly of articles written by invitation on assigned topics, invitations which were readily accepted. The high canons set up by Dr. Buck for this

magazine were maintained and extended by the editors who have since guided it.

The state archives—the official records of the departments of state government—Dr. Buck felt were “of perhaps greater importance as materials for history than all the collections of the society.” During 1915 the society co-operated with the public archives commission in making an inventory of the Minnesota state archives, and four years later the legislature passed an act authorizing the society to assume custody of noncurrent state archives. The importance, too, of the records of counties and other local government units, was recognized by Dr. Buck, and in 1916 and the year following, the society completed a survey of the archives of sixteen Minnesota counties.

When the United States entered the First World War, the various departments of the society began collecting materials relating to wartime activities and conditions in Minnesota. It soon became evident, however, that the project involved more work than the society could accomplish alone. At Dr. Buck’s instigation, a War Records Commission was appointed by the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety to take over the collection of war history materials, and after the war ended, the legislature established the Minnesota War Records Commission to complete the work. A notable result of the collecting activities of the commission was the publication by the society of the two-volume *History of Minnesota in the War with Germany*.

One of the most significant projects begun by Dr. Buck was the founding of county historical societies. These were the natural new growth from the matured parent society, the acorns from the oak. They represented especially an appreciation of local history. When the first local history conference was held at the Historical Building in 1921, there was no county activity to report; but Dr. Buck inspired several of the delegates to go home and arouse interest. Such a conference was made a regular feature of the society’s annual meetings, and at the second one a model constitution was presented. In 1922 the St. Louis County Historical Society was formed, the first permanent county historical society in the state. By 1930 there were

sixteen county societies, and before the state society had reached its centenary, there was a total of eighty-seven, one for each county in the state. These societies represent both pride and responsibility in local history. Just as each of these offshoots was nourished and sustained by the parent society, so now do they help support a reciprocal state-wide program.

During Dr. Buck's regime the membership was more than quadrupled, until, in 1930, the society could boast of 1,749 members. He founded a monthly press release in 1921 which has been maintained ever since and has been widely used by newspapers, and a *Check List of Minnesota Public Documents*, published from 1923 to 1941; he initiated annual summer meetings, the first of which, held in Duluth in 1922, was the only meeting up to that time which the society had held outside the Twin City area; and he encouraged and promoted the teaching of Minnesota history in the schools of the state.



The popular support accorded these new undertakings demonstrated that the people of Minnesota felt that their daily activity had some meaning in the scheme of time, that history gave a sense of continuity and furnished an anchor in the eddying changes of their own world. A further proof of this was the interest shown in the publication by the society of William Watts Folwell's comprehensive and scholarly *History of Minnesota*, the first volume of which appeared in 1921, and the fourth and last in 1930. The popular reception of this work showed not only a desire to understand the past but also a maturity rather recently attained by the people of Minnesota. Likewise, the publication of the Folwell *History* was an indication that the society itself had come of age.

The fact that Dr. Buck achieved so much in rejuvenating the society during the first few years of his administration was a partial measure of his success; but a more complete measure was his ability to sustain his program during the entire seventeen years of his regime. After the first few years his chief task was the administration of the enlarged organization that he had established. He was aided

greatly by enlarged appropriations to the society from the legislature, the first increase in twelve years being granted in 1917. This increase raised the annual figure from \$20,000 a year to \$25,000, and additional increases later brought the annual appropriation up to \$53,100 at the end of the decade.

When the society's financial condition permitted it, Dr. Buck augmented his staff with professionally trained and competent personnel. A number of them are still members of the staff: Willoughby M. Babcock, for many years curator of the museum and now head of the newspaper department; Mary W. Berthel, associate editor; Lois M. Fawcett, head of the reference division; Bertha L. Heilbron, editor of *Minnesota History*; Esther Jerabek, head of the accessions division; Esther Johnson, catalogue assistant; Irene Larson, catalogue clerk; Elsa R. Nordin, head cataloguer; and Grace Lee Nute, for many years curator of manuscripts and now research associate. Among his appointments also were two of his successors to the superintendency, Theodore C. Blegen, who became assistant superintendent of the society in 1922, and Arthur J. Larsen, who was appointed head of the newspaper department in 1928.

Dr. Blegen's appointment, like Dr. Buck's, was on a half-time basis, and he continued his duties as head of the history department at Hamline University and, later, as professor of history at the University of Minnesota. The team of Buck and Blegen was a happy one for the society, for the two men had the same high standards of scholarship, and they thought along the same lines in vital matters. The assistant superintendent took a large part in implementing the superintendent's program. He took over the editorship of *Minnesota History* and the monthly newspaper release, promoted the county historical society movement, and in innumerable ways assisted in broadening the society's services to the public.



In 1931 Dr. Buck resigned to become director of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey. Later he became archivist of the United States. The executive council did not have far to look for his successor, nor did it need to spend time in deliberation. Dr. Blegen

moved across the room to Dr. Buck's desk, and the administration of the society's affairs moved forward as usual, smoothly and quietly, with no need for readjustment on the part of the staff. But to Dr. Blegen the step across the room must have seemed formidable. He was to administer the affairs of the society alone, and still on a part-time basis; for he took over the superintendency in the financial depression of the 1930's, when the society's legislative appropriations were cut, and there was no money to pay an assistant superintendent.

Dr. Blegen guided the affairs of the society through most of the next decade. Largely through his scholarship and wise leadership, and his ideal of carrying the history of Minnesota to the people of the state, the society's activities expanded in spite of the depression, its collections multiplied, and its vitality increased. And the society basked in his reflected glory—in his reputation as an author, as an editor, as a speaker, as a leader in national professional organizations, and as the recipient of honorary degrees from universities here and abroad.

A project which Dr. Blegen considered "one of the most effective of the society's many public educational activities" was launched in 1932, when the first of a series of broadcasts on Minnesota history was given over the University of Minnesota radio station WLB. The series, given by staff members, was continued during the next two years, and was published in the *Minnesota Alumni Weekly*.

The year 1933 was designated by the governor as Minnesota's "Diamond Jubilee Year," for it was the seventy-fifth anniversary of the state's admission to the Union. The society took the lead in promoting a state-wide observance of the occasion, by arranging a Statehood Day program, planning a series of radio programs which were broadcast from several radio stations, publishing a Diamond Jubilee number of *Minnesota History*, organizing a committee to encourage various organizations to take part in the celebration, co-operating in a program for the schools, and providing information and assistance for a number of other observances of the anniversary.

With collections continually growing, the congestion in the part

of the Historical Building occupied by the society was increasing at an alarming rate. The situation was greatly relieved in 1933, when the state department of education, which had occupied part of the building since its construction, removed to the new State Office Building. Later, under WPA, substantial additions to the building were made under the two terraces, providing much needed stack and storage space.

The alphabetical government agencies generated by the depression were a boon to the society, if not to the overburdened staff who supervised the numerous activities in which the society co-operated. Important projects, which the society could not have attempted with its limited staff, were pushed forward by workers under these agencies, and many of them were completed. Under Dr. Blegen's direction, the survey of county archives, which had been started under Dr. Buck in 1916, was revived in 1934 under CWA, and later was continued by the Historical Records Survey of the WPA. Surveys of both county and state archives were completed, and the results of several of the county surveys were published. The Historical Records Survey also inventoried the archives of hundreds of cities, towns, and school districts, and the records of churches, cemeteries, fraternal, business, and other organizations. Under the partial supervision of the society, archaeological excavations were made at Grand Portage and Fort Ridgely. A WPA project was set up with some thirty workers to assist the society in a number of special tasks. These workers, under the direction of staff members, indexed and inventoried library and manuscript materials, made substantial progress on both a bibliography of Minnesota newspapers and on an analytical catalogue of the picture collection, transcribed manuscripts and special items from newspapers, cleaned and arranged documents, mended books, manuscripts, maps, and newspapers, constructed miniature groups for the museum, and built display cases, filing equipment, and other furniture. Out of all this activity came not only a valuable survey of the materials on Minnesota history in the state, but also guides to make them usable.

During Dr. Blegen's regime a notable series of publications appeared under the society's imprint. Under his editorship, *Minnesota*

History attained distinction as a leading periodical in its field. To provide an attractive and popular vehicle for the publication of some of the basic sources of state history, such as diaries, letters, and other documents, he launched a series of *Narratives and Documents* in 1932 with the publication of the diary and sketches of Frank B. Mayer. A volume of Jane Grey Swisshelm's letters followed in 1934, and another consisting of two Minnesota farmers' diaries appeared in 1939. Another series of publications begun in the 1930's was a group of *Special Bulletins*. Their purpose was to provide guides, inventories, indexes, bibliographies, and the like for the society's vast collections, and to outline the methods and practices that it has developed in preserving and administering its collections. The first of the series, a *Guide to the Personal Papers* in the society's manuscript collections, appeared in 1935. This was followed in rapid succession in 1935 by *Rules for Copying Manuscripts*, *A Bibliography of Minnesota Territorial Documents*, and *The Care and Cataloguing of Manuscripts*.

In 1934 appeared the first volume of Dr. Blegen's *Norwegian Migration to America*, based largely on material which he had assembled in Norway under a Guggenheim fellowship. In order to devote his energies to the preparation of the second volume of this important contribution to American immigration history, he resigned his position as the society's head in the summer of 1939. Not long after the completion of the book, he became dean of the graduate school of the University of Minnesota.



Once more the society's executive council faced the problem of finding a superintendent, and once more it filled the vacancy by turning to the staff. Their choice fell upon Dr. Larsen, at that time head of the newspaper department. Schooled under Dr. Buck and Dr. Blegen, both at the society and at the university, Dr. Larsen combined in his background not only administrative, but writing and research experience. He had received his Ph.D. degree in 1938 after completing a monograph on the Minnesota road system, he had organized a bibliography of Minnesota newspapers, and he had

edited the volume of Jane Grey Swisshelm's letters published by the society in 1934. Added to these qualifications, he had a personality which redounded to the society's benefit by making for it many new and faithful friends.

The ever-increasing administrative duties of the superintendent's office, as well as the steady demands upon his scholarly accomplishments, made it imperative that the new incumbent give his full time to the duties of his office. Thus, for the first time since Upham's day, a superintendent was on hand all day and every day. Although Dr. Larsen was not obliged to devote half of his energies to teaching, his administration was destined to meet with an even greater interruption—an interruption occasioned by the Second World War.

One matter that early drew Dr. Larsen's attention was the society's WPA program. The years 1940 and 1941 saw the completion of some important projects, such as inventories of the archives of more than thirty counties, a handbook of historic markers in Minnesota, and an inventory of early American imprints in the state. Each of Dr. Larsen's first three years was marked by the appearance of a society publication—a volume of *Minnesota Farmers' Diaries* edited by Rodney C. Loehr, the first edition of Dr. Nute's perennially popular *Voyageur's Highway*, and her well-edited collection of *Documents Relating to Northwest Missions*, the last published in co-operation with the Mississippi Valley Historical Association.

In the meantime, December, 1941, had come and gone, and for Americans Pearl Harbor had changed the face of the world. The society was soon drawn into the vortex. A military figure, Brigadier General Harold E. Wood, delivered the annual address for 1942; WPA came to an end; the short-lived Minnesota War History Committee was established in the Historical Building; and the superintendent was granted a leave of absence to accept a commission as a first lieutenant in the Army Air Forces.

Again the newspaper librarian was invited to move upstairs to the superintendent's office. The difficult and exacting tasks of keeping the society active and intact in wartime and of guiding its work in the direction of the war effort fell to Dr. Lewis Beeson. His familiarity with the Minnesota story stemmed from his collaboration

with Dean Blegen in compiling a study outline entitled *Minnesota: Its History and Its People*. Greatly to Dr. Beeson's credit is the fact that he succeeded in maintaining interest in the society and its program during a period when funds were low, when the use of its collections and its museum attendance dropped, when scarcity of paper curtailed publication, when gasoline shortages made summer tours impossible, when regulations regarding meetings put a stigma upon historical gatherings in the society's building and elsewhere. Difficulties notwithstanding, Dr. Beeson was able to inaugurate a notable program of co-operation with the schools, with the newly organized Folk Arts Foundation, and with local and national war records groups.

When Dr. Larsen was discharged in the fall of 1945 with the rank of major, and with a distinguished record of service as a historical officer for the Continental Air Forces, he returned to the society to find an institution that was ready to branch out into new fields and to embark on a number of new and important projects. Capitalizing on the work of a school committee, Dr. Larsen organized a junior historian program and in November, 1946, he inaugurated, in modest mimeographed form, the society's magazine for youthful readers, the *Gopher Historian*. Directed to this audience also were two sets of pictures for classroom use, published under the title *Pictorial Minnesota*. Another publication that owes its origin to Dr. Larsen is the monthly *News for Members*, designed especially to carry current news about the society and its accomplishments to its members.

Two *Centennial Publications* issued under Dr. Larsen's editorship in 1946 served to remind readers that Minnesotans would be staging a celebration in 1949. The first, *Minnesota Under Four Flags*, was made possible by the generous gift of \$1,000 from Mr. Robert Butler of St. Paul; the second, *Minnesota, the North Star State in Pictures*, was published for the society by the Itasca Press of St. Paul. Dr. Larsen began, too, to make definite plans for the Centennial celebration. To implement these plans the legislature of 1947 appropriated \$150,000, to be used during the fiscal years 1947-49 in preparing and carrying out in a fitting manner the commemora-

tion of the Minnesota Territorial Centennial. The society was designated the official state agency in charge of the celebration.

The period of Dr. Larsen's return to civilian life was marked by the inception, under the society's sponsorship, of two important research projects, each made possible by a special gift. Late in 1945 the Mayo Properties Association of Rochester authorized a gift of \$25,000 to the society to provide for the writing and publication of a history of public health in Minnesota. Professor Philip D. Jordan of the department of history of the university was chosen to direct the operation. Another member of the same department, Dr. Rodney C. Loehr, was named director of the society's Forest Products History Foundation, established in 1946 with funds provided by the Weyerhaeuser and Denkmann families, both long identified with the lumber industry. This research and writing project was made possible by a grant of \$50,000. The work of the foundation has expanded, until it now is operating on a national scale. Two other substantial gifts of money were received by the society in the last half of the decade—one of \$4,500 from the Oliver Mining Company to aid the society in publishing a history of iron mining in Minnesota, and the other of \$3,500 from the Minnesota and Ontario Paper Company for the publication of a history of the Rainy River region. Both books will appear under Dr. Nute's authorship.

In the summer of 1947, just as Centennial plans were getting well under way, with a special staff set up under the able direction of Dean J. M. Nolte, Dr. Larsen resigned to accept a commission as a major in the regular army. Shortly afterward he was assigned to the office of the air historian of the Army Air Forces in Washington. His successor was Dr. Carlton C. Qualey, professor of American history in Carleton College. On a part-time basis, Dr. Qualey retained his professorship, making the trip from Northfield to the society's building in St. Paul three times a week. The strain of administering the society's affairs during the difficult months of Centennial organization, combined with teaching and travel, proved to be too great and, before the end of a year, Dr. Qualey resigned. Dr. Harold Dean Cater arrived in St. Paul to take over the directorship of the society in August, 1948.

The events of the past decade, culminating in the Territorial Centennial, which Minnesotans throughout the state to its most remote corners celebrated with open-hearted enthusiasm, are too close to the present to be properly evaluated. To view the accomplishments of the society during this period and to judge their value, one needs the perspective of time. Obviously, the period from 1939 to 1949 was an era of change—in leadership, in personnel, in policies. Like the world in general, the Minnesota Historical Society was marked by restlessness during the decade of the Second World War. The effects of that restlessness must be left for the future to judge.

Nevertheless, it can be stated with certainty that, as the result of a century of accomplishment, the society has attained a reputation which places it among the four or five leading institutions of its kind in the United States. It serves a dual function, since it is both a private membership corporation and a semipublic institution that has from the beginning carried a full load of public responsibility. It is the official custodian of the state's history, and, as such, it is substantially maintained by the legislature. The sustaining interest of its members as well, and the devoted labors of such presidents in recent decades as William W. Folwell, Guy Stanton Ford, Edward C. Gale, Lester B. Shippee, Julius E. Haycraft, Kenneth G. Brill, and Bergmann Richards have been essential contributions toward the society's welfare. Rounding out a full century of progress, the 1949 Centennial served to focus the attention of thousands of people in and out of Minnesota upon the society and its value to the state, and therefore to secure more firmly than ever its position as one of the most significant institutions in Minnesota.



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