

MR. JARCHOW, who is dean of men in Carleton College at Northfield, is on leave during the current year to complete work on a centennial history of the college. His present article is adapted from a talk given before the Ramsey County Historical Society.

EXPLORING LOCAL HISTORY

An Experience of

"Adventure, Anxiety, Exertion, and Success"

MERRILL E. JARCHOW

AN ANONYMOUS correspondent writing in the *St. Croix Union* of Stillwater for August 11, 1855, described land pre-emption in that period. He suggested that claim making was "among the romances of frontier and pioneer life." After improvements are made on the claim "you go to the Land Office," he wrote, "'prove up' [,] pocket your duplicate, and wait till the record of your case can pass the inspection of the Department at Washington, and then to receive from the United States a patent . . . all this is an experience of adventure, anxiety, exertion, and success."

This phrase seems a particularly fitting description also of an excursion into the field of local history. Perhaps some people would question the use of the term "adventure" in this connection, reserving it to describe a trip to the Antarctic, the Amazon, or the far reaches of Tibet. Nevertheless two of the definitions of "adventure" — "an exciting experience," and "a remarkable experience" — apply to any thoroughgoing investigation of a theme in local history.

While adventures, be they expeditions to Arctic wastes or journeys in time through

books and manuscripts, are exciting and remarkable, they are apt also to be attended by anxiety. The adventurer will have cause to wonder if obstacles and dangers, as well as his own inadequacies, will prevent the completion of his mission, and unless there is exertion, failure will surely result. Given, however, the proper ingredients of an adventurous spirit, sensible anxiety, and the determination to pursue a task to its conclusion, the outcome as a rule is success and satisfaction, whether the safari be to some far-off Shangri-La or into the regional past.

Even though some excursions into the field of local history — like some adventures of other sorts — have contributed little of value to mankind, it is far from correct to dismiss all local history as "provincial antiquarianism." Many local studies not only have literary merit and abide by all the canons of scholarly procedure and criticism, but make a definite contribution to our understanding of ourselves as well.

One of the most compelling arguments for the study of regional history to come to my attention was presented a decade and a half ago by Clifford L. Lord, now president of

Hofstra College. Suggesting that the traditional emphasis on national events in our history is not adequate, Lord pointed out that "the background, the genesis, the legislative intent, and the effect" of national legislation must usually be sought in state and local history, and that the social scientist would do well to proceed from the specific to the general. "The study of history at the local level," wrote Lord, "reveals how things really happen; how things act and react, how the wheels and gears of history mesh and cog with one another." Furthermore, such study serves as a powerful antidote to syntheses of history which suggest that the individual is unimportant, that he is buffeted about by forces which are vast and incomprehensible as well as beyond his control. What each individual does may frequently seem insignificant, but what thousands of insignificant individuals do is vitally important. "So," Lord concluded, "what emerges from the study of the peoples' history is a strong reaffirmation of the importance of the individual, a tenet basic to Western civilization and essential to the American ideal."¹

Theodore C. Blegen, former superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society, put it well when he wrote, "The pivot of history is not the uncommon, but the usual, and the true makers of history are 'the people, yes.'"² Another long-time student of the American past, Bruce Catton, editor of *American Heritage*, has added his testimony, saying, "The faith that moves us is, quite simply, the belief that our heritage is best understood by a study of the things that the ordinary folk of America have done and thought and dreamed since first they began to live here."³

If we gain new insights and wisdom through delving into the history of local communities, if we confirm anew our traditional American faith in the individual through the same process, we may also help redress an imbalance which exists in our conception of ourselves. This may have developed in various ways. An important one certainly, and one relevant here, has been

the tendency of life to copy fiction — a tendency discussed a while back by Malcolm Cowley in an article for the *Saturday Review*. Noting how "characters and stories that had begun as literary creations lived on as archetypes of American life in the public mind," he suggested that an American mythology, probably more illusion than reality, appeared to provide a complete picture of American life.⁴

No doubt there is great truth in Mr. Cowley's contention, and when one considers some modern literature it becomes a depressing truth. My purpose, of course, is to castigate neither the novelists nor the poets — they make their contributions to our self-understanding. Indeed, some 260 years ago Andrew Fletcher anticipated the insight of Mr. Cowley when he wrote: "Give me the making of the songs of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws."⁵ The creative writers deserve their due, but as Mr. Cowley reminds us, they "have always been less attracted by the average than by the intense and extraordinary." If we are to find the "healthy average level" of American life, we must turn to the historian. On him — local and general historian alike — devolves the responsibility of redressing the imbalance created by the mythmakers. Admittedly historians have not been guiltless of making myths themselves, but this is hardly their function or intent.⁶

SHOULD anyone opine that all trails have been blazed, let him examine an editorial from the *Minneapolis Tribune*, as valid as when it was written more than a decade ago:

¹ Clifford L. Lord, "The Significance of State and Local History," in *Missouri Historical Review*, 44:133-136 (January, 1950).

² Theodore C. Blegen, *Grass Roots History*, vii (Minneapolis, 1947).

³ *American Heritage*, December, 1954, p. 3.

⁴ Malcolm Cowley, "American Myths, Old and New," in *Saturday Review*, September 1, 1962, p. 6-8.

⁵ Quoted in John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations*, 186 (11th edition, Boston, 1941).

⁶ Cowley, in *Saturday Review*, September 1, 1962, p. 8.

"The average American has but a surface knowledge of his country's history. There is a regrettable gap between what he knows of climactic events and the economic, political, and social pressures which caused them." Two years later the same newspaper reported the results of a poll which showed, among other things, that 90 per cent of Minnesota's population could not remember Frank B. Kellogg as a onetime United States Secretary of State.⁷ It is amazing to find how little it is that people often know of the heritage of their own neighborhoods and localities. By this ignorance they lose much of the richness and flavor that such knowledge can add to life.

Two experiences along this line are vivid in my memory. A number of years ago my car broke down in a certain Minnesota community. While waiting around town for the three or four hours it took to have the necessary repairs made, I thought I might visit a historic site in the vicinity, a site known nationally in a certain context. I queried nearly a dozen people before I found one who had even heard of the place despite its location only a short distance south of the town off the main highway and despite the existence of a marker.

The other experience occurred in Northfield, the "City of Colleges," which is probably equal in historical curiosity and culture to any community in the state. In speaking of the heritage of the Northfield area before the local Rotary Club, I happened to mention *The Mystery of Metropolisville* (1873) by Edward Eggleston, the setting for which is the vicinity of Cannon City, Faribault, and Northfield. Being among the first of the realistic novels in American literature, it possesses some significance. Just for fun I asked

⁷ *Minneapolis Tribune*, December 23, 1954, sec. 1, p. 4; August 19, 1956, sec. F, p. 3.

⁸ Walter O'Meara, "Adventure in Local History," in *Minnesota History*, 31:3 (March, 1950).

⁹ Merrill E. Jarchow, *The Earth Brought Forth: A History of Minnesota Agriculture to 1885* (St. Paul, 1949).

¹⁰ Ernest S. Osgood, ed., *The Field Notes of Captain William Clark: 1803-1805*, xxxiii (New Haven, 1964).

the assembled Rotarians if they had heard of the book. Only two hands went up!

One reason for our ignorance is, I suspect, the all too commonly held opinion that history is dull, boring, or useless — or all three. Far from being any of these things, the study of history, and especially of local history, is truly "an experience of adventure, anxiety, exertion, and success." Walter O'Meara, a New York advertising man who turned to history as an avocation and is now a well-known novelist of the fur trade era, has aptly described the excitement of historical research. While tracking down information concerning Daniel W. Harmon, a fur trader of the early nineteenth century, and his Indian wife, Mr. O'Meara's search took him "to half a dozen towns, into scores of homes, churches, clerks' offices, and graveyards, and over a mountain . . . in a blinding blizzard." With most of his questions answered, he wrote, "our adventure . . . proved one thing: how thrilling history can be — particularly if you get it from faded records locked away in lonely farmhouses, off weathered gravestones, from diaries and account books hidden in antique bureau drawers."⁸

MY OWN most thoroughgoing adventure in local history was an expedition into the agricultural story of pioneer Minnesota.⁹ For it I found the resources of the Minnesota Historical Society a veritable treasure-trove, especially its collections of newspapers, diaries, and letters. In the society the state possesses a wonderful repository for these fragile building blocks of local history; yet still the daily tragedy occurs of people unwittingly destroying documents — family letters and account books, for example — which are invaluable to students of our country's past and which ought to be preserved. Only a stroke of good fortune caused the original field notes of the Lewis and Clark expedition, recently edited by Ernest S. Osgood, to be salvaged some years ago from the attic of an old St. Paul home.¹⁰

Anyone who has not pored through the files of an old newspaper has an exciting ex-

perience awaiting him. For a starter let him peruse the file of Minnesota's first paper, the *Pioneer*, edited in St. Paul by James M. Goodhue, one of the ablest writers in the age of personal journalism. Goodhue's attack in 1851 on Judge David Cooper, for example, will be a revelation to anyone familiar only with the bland modern press, while the editor's general accounts of developments in Minnesota, his descriptions, and his narration will excite esteem and admiration.¹¹

So sprightly are many of the early newspapers that the adventurer must use self-control beyond the ordinary if he is not to be lured away from items bearing on his particular theme. The accounts of terrible tragedies reported in gory detail, the advertisements for hair dye and catarrh remedies, and other offerings of a century ago, are siren calls to which the researcher must remain immune if he is not to be diverted

from his course. Even so he may come away from an entire day spent paging through old papers with barely a card filled with notes. Again, when he least expects it, the item he is looking for seems to spring up from the yellowed page of an old weekly.

One is never sure in exploring the files of old newspapers just where the trail will lead. During the late 1940s while hiking with a friend through a cemetery south of Northfield, I happened quite by chance on an old tombstone with the following inscription: "Sacred to the memory of Sheridan Knowles MacKay, barrister at Law, Inner Temple, London, Born in Liverpool, England, Apr. 19, 1833, died in Northfield, August 6 1867." On the other side of the stone, an oddly shaped cross, is this inscrip-

¹¹ For an account of Goodhue, see Mary W. Berthel, *Horns of Thunder: The Life and Times of James M. Goodhue* (St. Paul, 1948).



TOMBSTONE of
Sheridan Knowles MacKay
as it appears in 1965

tion: "Here he now sleeps peacefully among strangers until the resurrection morn, when all earthly divisions will be unknown, and as there is but one shepherd there will then be but one sheep fold." At the foot of the cross close to the grass is one line: "Life's fitful fever's o'er." Obviously there was a story here. What was this Englishman doing in Northfield in the 1860s? What caused his death at the tender age of thirty-four?

My hiking friend and I were not the only ones who had stumbled upon MacKay's gravestone and wondered about the Englishman, for shortly afterward a letter inquiring about MacKay appeared in the *Northfield News*.¹² It was written by a Minneapolis woman. Some two and a half months later a letter came to the *News* from Professor Jesse S. Robinson of Carleton College who had read the lady's query while in England. His curiosity aroused, Professor Robinson consulted officials of the Inner Temple but was able to learn little about MacKay beyond the fact that he had been admitted to the bar in 1864, three years before his death in Northfield. The heat from fires when the Temple was bombed by the Nazis in World War II had unfortunately cemented together the pages of the old records which had been written on parchment.¹³

MacKay certainly was far from my mind as I paged through the *Farmers Union* in the newspaper room of the historical society; yet the following item in the September, 1867, issue caught my eye: "The Northfield Recorder publishes an account of the death of a well educated English gentleman named Sheridan R. McKay, [sic] who had been staying in that village some weeks, with the hope of reforming his habits of intemperance. A saloonkeeper induced him to break his pledge, and continued to furnish him liquor until he became delirious, in

which condition he wandered off, and was found dead in the woods between that place and Dundas." Hoping to get a fuller account of the story in the *Northfield Recorder* I asked the attendant to bring it up from the stacks. Ironically, the earliest edition of the *Recorder* in the possession of the society is dated September 13, 1867. Next I turned to the *Central Republican* of Faribault but there again came frustration, because the only notice of the affair was a copy of the same item which had appeared in the *Farmers Union*.¹⁴

Thus the mystery remains. Why did MacKay go to Northfield? Who was the unscrupulous saloonkeeper? Who paid for the cemetery lot and the gravestone? Here, then, is just one example of the intriguing highways and byways one will travel, frequently without intending to do so, on an adventure in local history. Incidentally, the whole MacKay episode including a picture of the gravestone was published in the *Northfield News* of August 5, 1948, from which it was picked up by *Publishers' Auxiliary*, a national newspaper trade publication. After retelling the story, the *Auxiliary* suggested that it pointed a moral for newspaper people: "Write Accurately, Posterity Watches." To this statement historians would say amen!¹⁵

OF THE DIARIES I used at the Minnesota Historical Society my favorite, I suppose, was that of Levi N. Countryman who farmed near Hastings during the late 1850s and the early 1860s. Often I wished I could reach back over the years, shake hands with Countryman, and thank him. He was apparently an unusual person, a graduate of Hamline University in the class of 1861, able to read Greek and Latin, intelligent, articulate, a stimulating personality. Unfortunately, his diary terminated in 1862 when he entered military service, but for the half-dozen years before then it is a wonderful mine of information on the everyday life of the early Minnesota farmer. Time after time a quotation from his diary answered some question which faced me or illustrated a point I

¹² *Northfield News*, April 1, 1948, p. 1.

¹³ *Northfield News*, June 17, 1948, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Farmers Union* (Minneapolis), September, 1867; *Central Republican* (Faribault), August 14, 1867.

¹⁵ *Post-Messenger* (Stillwater), December 2, 1948, p. 6.

wanted to make. All manner of subjects from schoolteaching, well-digging, funerals, livestock, and Fourth of July and Thanksgiving celebrations, to childbirth, toothaches, and family tensions, were fully and faithfully recorded in a most unself-conscious and delightful style. Typical of his entries which so frequently evoke empathy in the reader is one written after a day of harvesting: "Oh, how racked in body I feel, sore and lame all over my body; fingers cut up, etc. It is absolutely hard work to follow a reaper."¹⁶

Even though Countryman was still in his late twenties when he kept his diary, he complained of suffering from many bodily ills, such as decaying teeth and some sort of bleeding from the lungs. Having become so fond of him, I felt when I came to the end of his diary as if I had lost an old and dear friend. Considering the state of his health, I was inclined to suppose that he died rather young. It was therefore with a mixture of delight and surprise that I discovered he had lived until 1924 and an age of ninety-two years. His daughter, Gratia Countryman, who died in 1953 in Duluth, was for many years head librarian of the Minneapolis Public Library.¹⁷

Although Countryman is my favorite diarist, I have long been intrigued by an excerpt from the Swedish-language diary of another Minnesota pioneer: "Then we went to Dr. Lars and I made a bargain with him. If he could remove the growth that Anna has I will pay him \$25, but if he was not successful he is to have nothing, not one cent."¹⁸ The outcome I never learned!

Letters are also valuable guideposts for the adventurer into the past. In my experience I think particularly of those written by the Reverend George S. Biscoe who lived in Cottage Grove in the 1860s. Like Countryman, Biscoe had a lively, vibrant style, and fortunately he noted some of the everyday things which so often seem too commonplace to be worth recording — things which a century later are priceless for the historian. For example, he wrote about wheat during the boom period of the Civil War:

"Minnesota or that part of it known as Cottage Grove has gone to wheat. Men work in wheat all day when it does not rain, lounge around talking about wheat when it is wet, Dream about wheat at night, and I fear go to meeting Sabbath Day to think about wheat."¹⁹

Also of great help to one who would travel back into pioneer Minnesota are the letters written from various parts of the state by McCormick Harvesting Company agents to the firm's home office in Chicago. These are preserved on film strips in the Minnesota Historical Society. Since news channels were neither numerous nor complete, the agents discussed not only farm machinery but all manner of other things, such as weather, market conditions, crops, and politics, to keep the central office as well informed as possible. The letters were confidential and are quite revealing. One humorous example of the understandable bias reflected by the agents is a characterization of the two lawyers who in 1874 were editors of the *Grange Advance*. The agent observed scornfully that they "have both together just about brains enough for one decent lawyer, but not near enough for one good Reaper man! They could not make a respectable living in the law business, so now they are giving advice to farmers."²⁰

I have been struck by the never-ending nature of the historical adventure, by the coincidences which one encounters, and by the manner in which one discovery leads to another. One afternoon some years ago a lady stopped in my office on college business. She identified herself as a Miss McKinstry. I had difficulty concentrating on the conversation because her name rang a bell somewhere in

¹⁶ Countryman Diary, August 16, 1861.

¹⁷ *Minneapolis Journal*, March 29, p. 1; 30, p. 8, 1924.

¹⁸ Andrew Peterson Diary, September 3, 1872, in the Minnesota Historical Society. Translated by the author.

¹⁹ Biscoe to his sister Ellen, August 21, 1862, George S. Biscoe Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

²⁰ E. W. Brooks to Cyrus H. McCormick, January 17, 1874.

the back of my mind. Suddenly I recalled Azro P. McKinstry of Winnebago City, who has sometimes been described as the first creamery man in the state.²¹ I could not help asking my visitor if she had ever heard of him even though it seemed unlikely, since she came from New York. To my surprise her face brightened and she said: "Why, he was my grandfather, and his grandson, my cousin, is outside in the car." Needless to say, we all had a delightful chat about old times, and the McKinstrys seemed as excited about the discovery as I was.

WHILE adventures in local history involve anxiety and exertion, these somewhat unpleasant aspects are more than offset by large measures of fun and excitement. David Grayson put it well when he wrote:

²¹ See Jarchow, *The Earth Brought Forth*, 216, 220.

²² David Grayson [pseud. for Ray Stannard Baker], *Adventures in Contentment*, 201 (New York, 1916).

²³ Gershwin, George and Ira, "I Got Rhythm" from *Girl Crazy* (1930).

THE PHOTOGRAPH of MacKay's tombstone on page 268 is by Roland W. Finner of Northfield.

"What a convenient and delightful world is this world of books! — if you bring to it not the obligations of the student, or look upon it as an opiate for idleness, but enter it rather with the enthusiasm of the adventurer! It has vast advantages over the ordinary world of daylight, of barter and trade, of work and worry."²²

But beyond the joys, the thrills, the unexpected insights, and the discoveries — in other words the personal satisfactions — comes something more. Just as adventures in the physical world help us broaden our horizons and understand the environment in which we live, so do adventures into the world of the mind add to our understanding of who we are, where we are, what we are, and whither we are heading. As we delve into the study of our area we shall perhaps uncover important source documents, or turn out a book or article which will have real impact, awakening in others an interest in our heritage and an appreciation of its significance. In our adventure we can do something worth while and still have fun. To borrow a phrase from a popular song of the past: "Who could ask for anything more?"²³

Minnesota Anonymous No Longer

THE APPEAL for help in identifying five Minnesota scenes published in the Summer issue of this magazine has brought a widespread response. Four have been definitely located as follows:

The nostalgic village scene at the top of page 252 is near the corner of Penn Avenue South and West Old Shakopee Road in Bloomington. The view at the bottom of page 252 and the street scene at the top of page 253 are both from Crookston. Mr. Marvin R. Campbell of that town writes: "The river scene is now known as the 'old dam.' . . . The brick building housed generators and equipment of the locally-owned Crookston Light and Water Company. . . . Directly behind the Power Company building is the Crookston Roller Mill" which "burned several years after the picture was

taken." The street is "North Broadway looking south, and many of the buildings in the photo are still standing and in use."

Several correspondents and callers identified the second picture on page 253 as Minneapolis' Calhoun Boulevard between Lake Calhoun (at left) and Lake Harriet. Mr. Sigurd Ueland of Shafer writes: "As children we used to sit on what we called Big Rock shown at the left of the picture and watch the carriages of the elite as they drove out to the band concerts at Lake Harriet."

Still not definitely located is the country post office shown at the bottom of page 253. The staff of the society's picture collection are grateful to the many people who have taken the trouble to send in helpful suggestions and clues.



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