

# MINNESOTA REGIONAL RESEARCH CENTERS

James E. Fogerty

THE MINNESOTA Historical Society is well along with its program of branching out to collect, process, and make available historical materials across the state. With the help of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Minnesota Resources Commission, the society now has six Minnesota Regional Research Centers (MRRCs) operating in facilities provided by five state colleges (Mankato, St. Cloud, Moorhead, Bemidji, and Southwest at Marshall) and the University of Minnesota at Morris. Geographical coverage of the state will be complete when two more centers, now in the planning stage, are added at Winona and Duluth. The regional centers collect private manuscripts, oral history, and photographs of special interest and pertinence to the areas in which they are located; the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul collects like materials of state-wide and national importance.

The center system was launched in the late 1960s with branches at Mankato and St. Cloud, but the society had considered the idea of a regional history network earlier. The concept is not new — successful systems already exist in Ohio and Wisconsin, and another is being organized in Michigan — but Minnesota's approach differs in some respects from the others. Instead of filling the centers with ready-to-use collections, the Minnesota Historical Society has encouraged the regional branches to involve themselves in a wide range of activity — from doing research on potential donors of materials and possible oral history subjects to making contacts, receiving collections, and processing them. Minnesota centers are located in outstate colleges because of their accessibility, their facilities, and the supply

of student help they offer for collecting and processing of materials. In fact, the centers provide students experience and training in archival work in addition to making available materials that might not otherwise be preserved. Far from being limited to college use, the various centers are open to the public during regular hours.

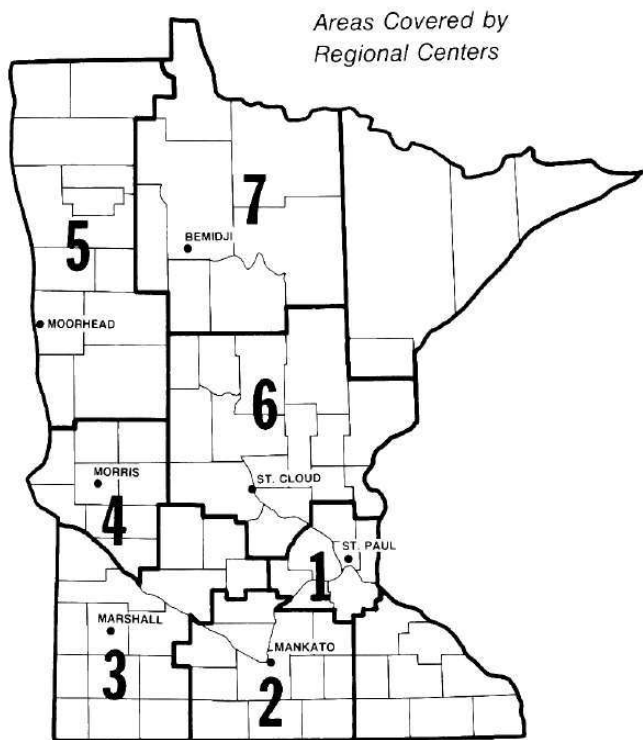
James E. Fogerty is regional centers director in charge of co-ordinating the network, which is operated by the Minnesota Historical Society. Each center is headed by a director who has three to eight assistants, many of them students. Regional center directors are: William E. Lass, Mankato; Calvin W. Gower, St. Cloud; I. Kenneth Smemo, Moorhead; David L. Nass, Marshall; Arthur Charvat, Bemidji; and Wilbert H. Ahern, Morris. Each center has been assigned a region of the state (see map) as a collecting area. Assignments were made to reduce confusion in collecting and to facilitate work with other collecting agencies. The directors have defined various fields of collecting interest for the centers — largely in subject areas which have been neglected, overlooked, or developed haphazardly. In all these efforts the collecting specialties of other agencies — like county historical societies — are taken into account, especially where strong collections already have been established. In some cases a particular collection obtained by a center might be offered to another repository which has a significant collection in that field. The centers are co-ordinative, not competitive.

A few examples of recent accessions will show the types of things regional centers collect. The Mankato center has received the papers of Lea College, for instance, and the original manuscript of Lewis H. Garrard's 1850 book, *Wah-to-yah and the Taos Trail*. Also among the more than two dozen collections accessioned at Mankato were the St. Peter Hospital Papers

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MHS COLLECTIONS

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and the Thomas Hughes Papers. The Southwest Minnesota Historical Center at Marshall recently received the bound volumes of the weekly newspaper, *Cottonwood Current*, from 1893 to 1964.

All centers in the MRRC system have received manuscript collections and, through active collecting programs, have arranged to receive many more. Several of the collections at the centers are large (political collections average between thirty and sixty boxes each, for example). A number of photographic collections have been added, including several of glass-plate negatives picturing Minnesota's frontier development. Organizing and preparing the collections for use, even with a streamlined processing system designed to make materials accessible in the shortest possible time, require considerable care and time. Since the backbone of the MRRC network is its collections, plans at all centers call for continued active collecting and an enlarged processing program to match.

The oral history phase of the collecting program has proven especially valuable (the Southwest center is one of the leaders in oral history). Interviews with carefully selected subjects have often led to the acquisition of related manuscript collections as well as valuable tape recordings. Taped interviews with donors also supplement some existing manuscript collections, to the benefit of researchers. Researching and conducting interviews and transcribing them afterward take considerable effort, but the end result is well worth it.

One of the objectives of the MRRC setup is to produce a resource inventory of the holdings of county and local historical societies. (The need for identification of existing historical material across the country has led to introduction of the National Historical Records Act bill to provide for inventorying.) In Minnesota a pilot project was carried out under carefully controlled conditions. One person from each of the participating centers worked full time for a period of ten weeks; their efforts resulted in an inventory of the manuscript resources of some thirty county historical societies. The project provided important training for personnel and valuable data on the methods, procedures, informational forms, and the like needed to complete a full-scale inventory of the more than 100 county and local historical societies in Minnesota. The inventory work will form the basis for a continuing project leading to a Minnesota Union Catalog of Manuscripts.

The Morris center did not conduct a county historical society inventory. Instead, interns there inventoried the public records resources of county and municipal agencies of the Morris area. Using the Work Projects Administration inventory of the 1930s as a base, they updated WPA material and produced a new list of county and municipal records. The Morris inventory is particularly valuable because it provides information which will be used in designing a state-wide inventory of public records prior to including some of these records in the regional centers' collections.

The MRRC program has progressed rapidly in a short time. This is due in part to the fine co-operation of county and local historical societies. They helped considerably in the inventory project and also, in some instances, have offered manuscript collections, oral history tapes, photographs, and newspaper collections to the centers. A further example of co-operation is the oral history project recently begun jointly by the Blue Earth County Historical Society and the Southern Minnesota Historical Center at Mankato. The Blue Earth Society has assembled an impressive oral history "lead" file which it is giving to the center for use in the latter's oral history program. Blue Earth staff members and others will review the leads with MRRC interviewers, who will then conduct the interviews. The Blue Earth Society thus furnishes research and advice while the center provides staff, travel time, and equipment. The society and center both will have copies of the resulting tapes. Other projects of this type are planned throughout the network. Regional institutes, jointly sponsored by the centers, regional assemblies, county historical societies, and the Minnesota Historical Society, are also planned.

The value of the centers' involvement in regional development is increasingly apparent. The centers have been strengthened by the participation of students and staff members in regional activities. Directors have

talked to local groups, conducted oral history clinics, helped sponsor regional meetings, participated in local activities, and in general have made the centers into identifiable and important assets in their geographic areas. The oral history programs, in particular, bring directors and interns into communication with a wide cross section of people in their regions — state legislators and local officials, bankers, farmers, lawyers, and others. The pilot inventory of county and local society resources further broadened the scope of contact, providing a means of co-operating with these groups in their own efforts. This activity has had a good response from the societies' staffs and memberships. The county societies are in a strong position to expand their use of MRRCs and develop regionally co-ordinated collecting pro-

grams. Expansion of the centers' role in community service is as important as the continuation and expansion of the collecting program and is an integral part of it.

In practice, the centers serve as regional extensions of the Minnesota Historical Society; together they represent an effort by the society to reach everyone in the state. Some state historical societies are isolated or "elite" institutions, but the Minnesota Historical Society is making a determined effort to make its resources available on as wide a scale as practical. Through the programs of all its divisions, including the regional centers, it is working to ensure that Minnesota history, whether of local, county, regional, state, national, or international significance, is adequately preserved and made accessible to all.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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*Private Liberal Arts Colleges in Minnesota: Their History and Contributions.* By Merrill E. Jarchow. (St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Society, 1973. xiii, 345 p. Illustrations. \$17.00.)

MERRILL E. JARCHOW has compiled an encyclopedic survey of Minnesota's sixteen, private, accredited, four-year liberal arts colleges, institutions whose histories reflect pioneer idealism, the diverse aspirations of religious and ethnic groups, heroic leadership efforts by presidents and others, and the sustained loyalty of students and alumni. His book is organized chronologically into three sections, treating the years 1850-1900, 1900-1940, and 1940-1970. Each section is prefaced by an essay surveying the principal developments and issues in American higher education during the period under consideration.

The separate institutional histories which follow offer a fascinating panorama. Carleton, founded by Congregationalists in 1866; Hamline (the oldest of the sixteen), founded by Methodists in 1854; and Macalester, established by the Presbyterians in 1874, have attracted national recognition. St. Olaf (1874) and Gustavus Adolphus (1867-76) symbolize the aspirations of Norwegian and Swedish Lutherans respectively. Norwegian Lutherans also sponsored Augsburg in Minneapolis and Concordia College in Moorhead, while Concordia in St. Paul originated with German-Americans. Roman Catholic efforts gave rise to St. Benedict, St. Catherine, Saint Teresa, and St. Scholastica colleges for women, and St. John's, St. Mary's, and St. Thomas for men. Conservative Swedish Baptists founded Bible-centered Bethel in St. Paul. Mr. Jarchow's sketches of each institution are balanced and judicious, treating such topics as chartering, new buildings, presidential leadership, and fund raising, as well as changing academic programs and the flavor of

student life. His accounts amply illustrate the richness and diversity of Minnesota's heritage in higher education and demonstrate that in recent decades national forces have superseded local efforts in determining the destiny of each institution.

Here, then, is a volume to be enjoyed and cherished by the alumni of each college. Yet it was not undertaken simply to arouse nostalgic memories but to stimulate and strengthen commitment to the ideal of the liberal college. The concluding section of almost every institutional survey in the book is shadowed by the specter of financial crisis; clearly Minnesota's institutions share the uncertain future which faces private higher education across the nation. Mr. Jarchow has enlisted as a warm defender of the institution he has served (he was associate professor of history and dean of men at Carleton) and chronicled. "The private liberal arts college," he writes in his preface, "has long been and still is a potent safeguard against the erosion of a strong free society." Moreover, at a time when many of the nation's political and cultural institutions are severely strained, the renewal of private higher education could produce benefits not confined to the educational world. Such an effort, however, must be (and can be) defined as a realistic as well as an idealistic goal. Hence, it is disappointing to find the author so often in his narrative relying on platitudes and the self-congratulatory rhetoric of press releases and committee reports, frequently at precisely the point where incisive evaluation is needed. Each of the institutional sketches in Part III, for example, ends with such an inspirational passage.

The outstanding contemporary scholarship on American higher education is analytical and sociological — too starkly so for my own taste. For example, Burton R. Clark's *The Distinctive College* (1970), poses the sort of questions that might well be asked in evaluating Minnesota's private institutions. Even more



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