

Critical Choices for the *Minnesota Historical Society*

Russell W. Fridley



THE DEDICATION of the Minnesota Historical Society building on May 11, 1918, drew this crowd of MHS members and representatives of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association. You might recognize some of the people standing on the steps.

THIS REPORT on the Minnesota Historical Society's past, present, and future concluded the day-long MHS annual meeting and history conference held Saturday, October 21, 1978, at the Sheraton-Ritz Hotel in Minneapolis. Russell W. Fridley, who made the address at the evening banquet, has been director of the society since 1955. Under his leadership the MHS has grown from a staff of forty housed in a single location and supported by an annual budget of \$190,000 to a major cultural institution with an operating budget in excess of \$6,000,000 and a staff of more than 300 housed in four major locations. In some respects this paper is an updating of the last full-scale article on the MHS to appear in Minnesota History — "The Minnesota Historical Society: Highlights of a Century," by Mary Wheelhouse Berthel and Harold Dean Cater. It was published in December, 1949, in connection with the Minnesota territorial centennial and the 100th anniversary of the founding of the society. Among other things, Fridley deals with changes in the historical profession since 1949 and raises questions about how the MHS in particular might face its new and old challenges. — Ed.

IN EXPRESSING his thanks to the Minnesota Historical Society in the preface to *The Godseeker* in 1951, Sinclair Lewis wrote: "The Minnesota Historical Society was cannily founded before there was any state or much of any history." Lewis, who did the research for this book at the society, was impressed by the unusual circumstance of a historical society antedating the state it serves by nine years. In fact, the incorporation of the society was the fifth act of the first territorial legislature in 1849, and its establishment followed civil organization more quickly than that of any other historical society in the nation.

When the society was founded in the fall of 1849 the settlement known as Minnesota Territory was confined to a triangle between the St. Croix and Mississippi rivers, with a vaguely defined northern boundary reaching to Sauk Rapids and Taylors Falls. The population numbered 5,000. By a generous count, St. Paul had 910 inhabitants, Stillwater 609, St. Anthony 248.

Among the society's nineteen incorporators were six of the seven presidentially appointed Whig officials of the territory, including the entire three-member Supreme Court, St. Paul's first postmaster, Minnesota's first industrialist, its first practicing attorney, a St. Paul physician, a lumberman, and six veteran fur traders who had already helped to make some twenty years of history on the northwestern frontier.

Thirteen of these men were from St. Paul, one from Mendota (Henry H. Sibley), one from St. Anthony (Franklin Steele), one from Bloomington (Martin

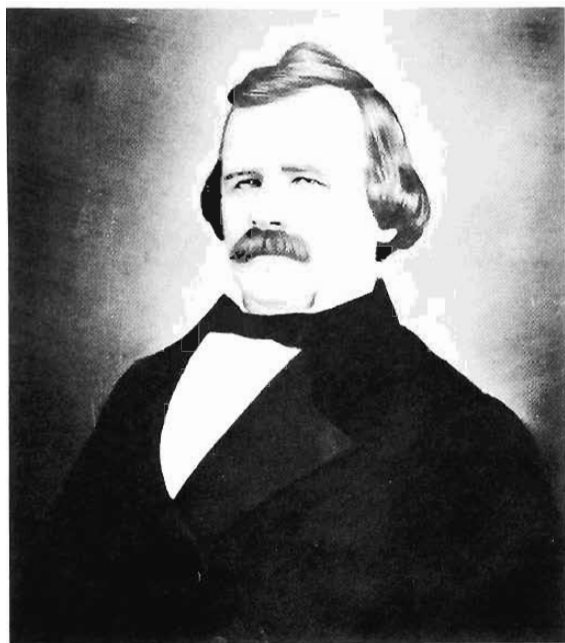
McLeod), one from Stillwater (David Loomis), one from Long Prairie (David Olmsted), and one from Sauk Rapids (Lorenzo Babcock).

The idea for a historical society sprang from the fertile imagination of the territorial secretary — Charles K. Smith. He drew up the act and named the incorporators, neglecting in characteristic fashion to consult the other eighteen. Frascible and arrogant, Smith has received more blame than acclaim in the annals of Minnesota. He showed rare skill in making enemies and little talent for friendship. Nevertheless, on November 15, 1849, a majority of the men he had named, met, organized, and elected officers of the society, with Governor Alexander Ramsey as president and Smith as secretary. Their decision to follow Smith and come to his meeting was the first critical choice made on the society's behalf.

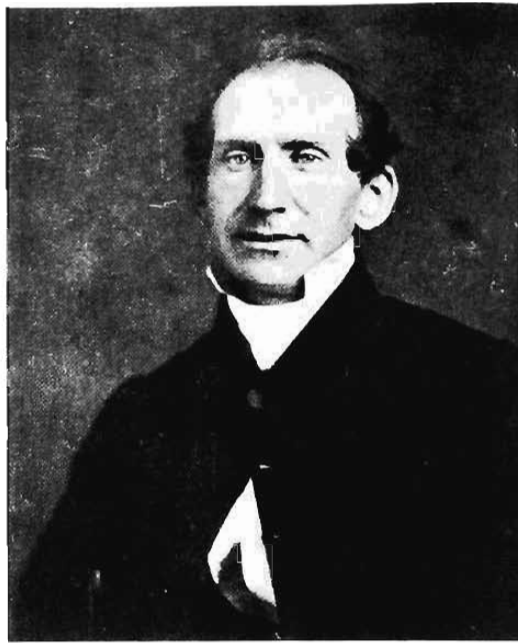
Also actively aiding Smith in the first cycle of the society's existence were the Reverend Edward D. Neill and Daniel A. Robertson, a St. Paul newspaper publisher. Ramsey's association with the territorial government, Neill's devotion to the business of the society, and Robertson's concern for acquiring collections, members, and a home provided strong leadership for the new organization. All three were effective spokesmen. Neill, the independent-minded founder of Macalester College with a long career in religion and education ahead of him, delivered the first annual-meeting address in 1850. He exhorted the small band to: "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." Eight years later Neill himself wrote the first history of Minnesota, published only two weeks after Minnesota was admitted to the Union as a state.

The incorporators made a second critical choice when they decided to establish a membership society and hold regular meetings. Beginning with fewer than 100, the membership slowly increased to 300 by 1900. The small but devoted group met at various intervals at what they proposed to call "conversational meetings." One of the earliest, held before Smith left Minnesota, was described by Dr. Thomas R. Potts in a letter to Sibley in 1851. "Governor Ramsey the President, delivered a very pretty address and McLeod and Becker read papers from Mr. Riggs and Schoolcraft," Potts said. "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 organization." The early proceedings were published beginning in 1850. They are among the earliest Minnesota imprints, and they launched a distinguished MHS publications program that continues to this day.

Although it is not widely known, the society as early as 1851 was helpful to the publishing program of the Smithsonian Institution. Feeling itself not well enough



DANIEL
A.
ROBERTSON



EDWARD
D.
NEILL

established to tackle the project, the MHS raised funds to publish the large book entitled *Grammar and Dictionary of the Dakota Language*, compiled by four missionaries to the Dakota — Stephen Riggs, the Pond brothers (Gideon and Samuel), and Thomas Williamson. By selling subscriptions in advance, the MHS ensured the publication of this important contribution to Indian philology, which appeared as the fourth volume in the Smithsonian's *Contributions to Knowledge* series. In doing so, it made a choice critical to its future by deciding to collaborate with other organizations.

Additional critical choices followed quickly. In 1854 the minutes recorded that "the first moneys in the treasury" were to be paid to Secretary Neill "for books and manuscripts procured by him for the use of the Society." The following year the organization, which had been meeting in churches, the house of representatives, and the offices of members, procured its first home in the Capitol, thus strengthening its physical ties to the government. The treasurer reported proudly that "a sufficient sum" had been "raised to fit up and keep warm a room for the use of the Society during the coming winter."

That was not good enough for Robertson, however, who told the members that "two suitable lots" for a future historical hall "had been purchased on Wabasha street for the sum of \$1,500." Since the treasury did not contain that much money, he proposed to pay for them by selling life memberships at \$25 each. The following year, nothing daunted, the group laid the cornerstone of a proposed new hall. Meanwhile, the officers had made three important requests to the legislature: They asked for an appropriation of \$500 and two amendments to

allow the society to receive property and funds in any amount and to elect an executive council. The legislature obligingly acceded to these requests, and the first executive council of twenty-five members was elected on March 21, 1856.

A period of stagnation followed. The proposed building was never completed. A Capitol fire in 1857 destroyed some collections. The Civil War began. After 1861 no meetings were held for three years, the state appropriations were discontinued, and the group had no home. Secretary Neill marched off to serve as chaplain of the First Minnesota Regiment. Then he became a clerk in President Abraham Lincoln's office. It was through this association that a small but fine collection of original Lincoln letters were secured for the society.

By 1864 the legislative appropriation was renewed, and meetings began again. The organization secured quarters in the St. Paul Public Library, but its collections were scattered about. A "finely preserved Eagle" stood on the speaker's desk in the legislature, while a shovel-nosed sturgeon was suspended from the ceiling of the society's "overcrowded room." Among the topics featured in lectures were "The Formation and Dissolution of Ice" and "What is the most northerly point in the state that rattlesnakes have been found?"

During the society's formative period its roots were firmly established. As Minnesota's oldest institution, it was functioning when the state was created in 1858. Its independence of but close association with the state was well defined. A membership organization, its major support came from the state. In this first frontier cycle of its life, the society's activities were limited, its membership was small, and it was dominated by men in territo-

rial and state government. Living largely in St. Paul, they were history buffs, many of whom had special interests in such topics as explorers and the fur trade. The second life cycle in the institution's existence was to see it move toward the acquisition of a full-time staff and greater concentration on its collecting objectives. But many of the founding fathers were still active, and as an institution it was still antiquarian in character.

THE SECOND CYCLE may be dated from 1867, when J. Fletcher Williams was appointed as secretary. Williams came from Ohio to St. Paul as a newspaper reporter. For a time he received no compensation and devoted only his spare time to the task of MHS secretary. The arrangement benefited the organization, however, for his 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."

The foundations of Minnesota's economy being laid at this time were based upon the state's varied natural resources — farms, lumbering, iron mining, and flour milling. Railroads were just beginning to fan out from the Twin Cities. Steamboats and stagecoaches were still familiar modes of transportation. The Civil War had a long aftermath in Minnesota as elsewhere. It flavored the tone of public events and political rhetoric and gave a Union veteran a marked advantage in running for public office. The industrial age had reached the North Star State. Minnesota's population witnessed extraordinary growth, and the public domain of the frontier was reduced as homesteaders moved westward and northward. This period saw the building of railroads, a burst of agricultural production, the rise of the flour-milling industry, the high point of lumbering, and business and financial expansion.

On May Day, 1867, the society celebrated the 100th anniversary of Jonathan Carver's treaty with the Dakota at Carver's cave in St. Paul. In the afternoon the members made a pilgrimage to the cave and explored it by the light of candles and lanterns, their songs, conversation, and laughter reverberating from the caverns as they crossed the interior lake by boat. The following year the organization returned to new rooms in the Capitol basement. In 1869 the legislature established the society as a free public library and appropriated \$2,000 for the "better support and usefulness" of the institution. The increased appropriation provided a salary for Williams, and he abandoned his newspaper career.

Said one of his contemporaries of Williams: "He is small, polite, obliging, industrious, and a walking encyclopedia. . . . He is like a singed cat, a good deal better than he looks." As Williams saw it, the society had three



J. FLETCHER
WILLIAMS

functions: collecting, preserving, and publishing. Of the three, he considered publishing as "perhaps the least valuable," but he saw six volumes of the *Minnesota Historical Collections* through the press, including his own pioneering history of St. Paul. As early as 1869 Williams urged the need to establish an endowment. But throughout most of his twenty-six years with the organization he carried on its work alone. Not until 1888 did he gain an assistant.

His passion was the building of the library collections, which then included manuscripts, newspapers, pictures, and books. The museum, or "cabinet of curiosities," seems to have been his least concern. Through his efforts outstanding books on Minnesota and the Northwest were assembled. He also systematically acquired genealogies, laying the foundations of the present fine collection for which the society is now nationally known. He began to purchase books in 1867, spending a total of \$73. By 1887 the figure was up to \$2,700, although gifts and donations still made up more than half of the library's acquisitions — as indeed they do to this day, totaling 64.4% last year. By 1889 the library had 40,000 books and 1,500 bound volumes of newspapers. It also contained the beginnings of a manuscripts collection. The first major manuscripts accession was received in 1868 — the papers of Lawrence Taliaferro, the Indian agent at Fort Snelling. Washington and Lincoln items were added. The Henry Sibley papers arrived in 1893, the last year of Williams' service as secretary. Williams boasted that "the people regard this society as the fountain and treasury of every fact related to Minnesota, and they are seldom sent away empty-handed." We like to think that is still true today.



**WARREN
UPHAM** became
MHS secretary
in 1895, and re-
mained on the
staff almost
forty years —
until 1933.

Williams' tenure also witnessed a power struggle among members of the society's executive council. At issue was where the power to govern the society rested. The struggle started innocently with those two lots Robertson had purchased in 1856. Twenty years later the council was asked to decide whether the lots should be utilized to produce income or whether they should be allowed to remain unoccupied. The council voted seven to three for income, but a faction led by Judge Aaron Goodrich refused to accept that decision. When a rescinding resolution introduced by Goodrich was again voted down by ten to four, what Williams called the "unpleasantness" escalated, decisively divided the members, and wound up in the Minnesota Supreme Court.

In the course of his arguments, Goodrich took the position that the only legitimate trustees of the society had been named in the original charter and that "they cannot add to their number" — a state of affairs that would have made the 1856 increase in the council illegal. Such men as Sibley, Neill, Robertson, and General John B. Sanborn maintained that the society's original charter gave the "right to admit new members at pleasure," a right "every such [private] corporation possesses," and that the 1856 act was valid.

To the disappointment of the Goodrich faction, the Supreme Court ruled on January 11, 1879, that the original organization of 1849 was the legally constituted body

and that the act of 1856 was entirely constitutional. Rather than spend state funds to pay the court costs, the council members then subscribed enough money to defray all expenses, and Williams reported in relief that the work of the society had not been "retarded."

A second eruption occurred during Williams' tenure when the flamboyant Captain Willard Glazier claimed that he, not Henry Schoolcraft, was really the discoverer of the source of the Mississippi. The source, he said, was Elk Lake, not Lake Itasca. He asked that the name of Elk Lake be changed to Glazier Lake, and he called upon the society to recognize it as the river's source. In 1886 the society commissioned James H. Baker to investigate. In a report read at a special meeting on February 8, 1887, Baker, a former secretary of state and the United States surveyor general for Minnesota, discredited Glazier's claims. The meeting adopted Baker's report and unanimously approved a resolution stating that Lake Itasca was the source of the river and asking the legislature to fix it "irrevocably" on the map "so that its earliest explorers be not robbed of their just laurels and to remove temptations to adventurers in the future to gain notoriety by attaching their names" to lakes.

According to Williams' minutes, "At this point a young man who was seated in the audience arose in an excited manner, and demanded permission to address the meeting. The fellow then began an excited harangue by saying that he was a brother of Captain Glazier and that the assertions of Gen. Baker . . . were false and slanderous. He proceeded for a few moments, abusing Gen. B. and the Society, when [former Governor] William R. Marshall arose and ordered him to cease — declaring that he was unwilling to listen to such billingsgate. The chair put the question: 'Shall the speaker be allowed to proceed?' It was unanimously voted in the negative."

The young man still demanded the floor. "Well, I only wanted to say that I expected better treatment from a state historical society," he persisted. Whereupon Marshall, greatly insulted, called the man "a consummate liar." The minutes of the meeting left no doubt that feathers had been ruffled, for they concluded with the statement: "Despite the dignity and character of the gentlemen present there appeared to be a general desire to follow the troublemaker out and mob him."

The captain's false claims drew the society's interest to Lake Itasca. In 1888 Jacob V. Brower, a lawyer who had served as register of the United States law office at St. Cloud, proposed to undertake a comprehensive survey of the Itasca basin at his own expense if the society would commission him to do so. It did, and the next year Brower organized a party of engineers and carried out the survey, conclusively proving that Itasca was indeed the river's source and that Glazier was a fraud. Two years later the society asked the legislature to establish a park



THE SOCIETY'S STAFF around the turn of the century flanked secretary Warren Upham (center) at the door to the MHS quarters in the old (second) State Capitol. Working in the newspaper room also in the old State Capitol (below, left) is Josiah B. Chaney. Below right is a view of the MHS reading room in the new Capitol before the construction of the present Historical Building.



at the headwaters of the great river. The legislature acted upon this suggestion, creating Itasca State Park in 1891 with Brower as its superintendent. Itasca is, as some of you may know, one of the half-dozen earliest parks in the United States, coming only six years after the preservation of Niagara Falls and one year after the establishment of Yosemite.

With this important event, J. Fletcher Williams' term drew to a close. His health failed in 1893, and he resigned. He had led the institution out of the frontier era to the edge of the twentieth century with its dawning concerns about conservation. As the society's first paid employee, he had brought some order and system to its library, expanded its publication program, and presided over the loss of its "cabinet of curiosities," including the stuffed eagle and sturgeon when the first Capitol burned in 1881.

The state emerged from a rugged panic in the economy. Minnesota had clearly become a state of immigrants with the recent election of its first Scandinavian and foreign-born governor. Farmers were unhappy over income and freight rates and organized into powerful protest movements that would influence the state's political behavior over several decades. Oats and corn joined wheat as major crops. Minneapolis overtook St. Paul as the largest city, but the legislature authorized a grant for a new State Capitol building in St. Paul.

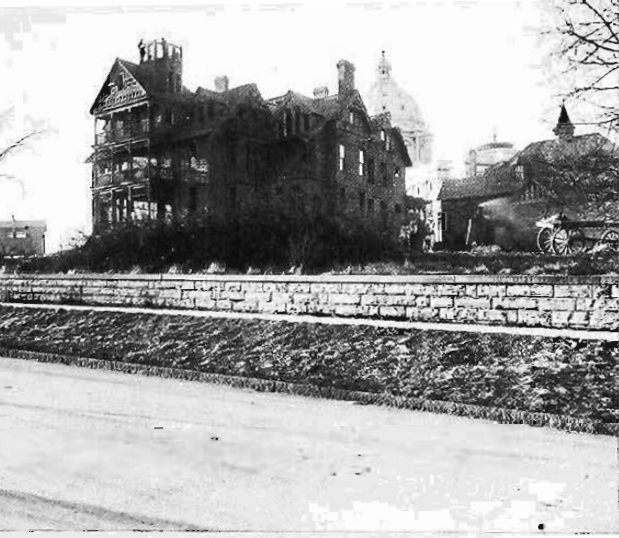
A NEW SECRETARY succeeded Williams in 1895. He was Warren Upham, a trained geologist from New Hampshire who had ridden more than 11,000 miles throughout the state on horseback as Newton Winchell's assistant on the Minnesota Geological Survey. He was to remain on the society's staff until 1933. Modest, thoughtful, and retiring, he was far more interested in nurturing the growth of the library than in meeting the public. During his tenure, the library collection doubled to more than 100,000 volumes, legislative appropriations increased from \$6,000 to \$20,000 annually, and the staff expanded from two to twelve. Less aggressive than Williams, Warren Upham was more interested in writing. He made his mark as the editor of five volumes of the *Minnesota Historical Collections*. He himself was the author, or coauthor with Rose Dunlap, a member of the library staff, of the two best-known volumes in that series — *Minnesota Biographies* and *Minnesota Geographic Names*.

It was during Upham's tenure that the Kensington rune stone first came to the notice of the society in 1908. It has been with us ever since. Upham invited Olof Ohman, the stone's finder, to attend the December, 1909, meeting of the society and tell the members "about the discovery of the Rune Stone on your farm." In reply he received a four-page letter in Swedish — the only known record by the finder in his own handwriting

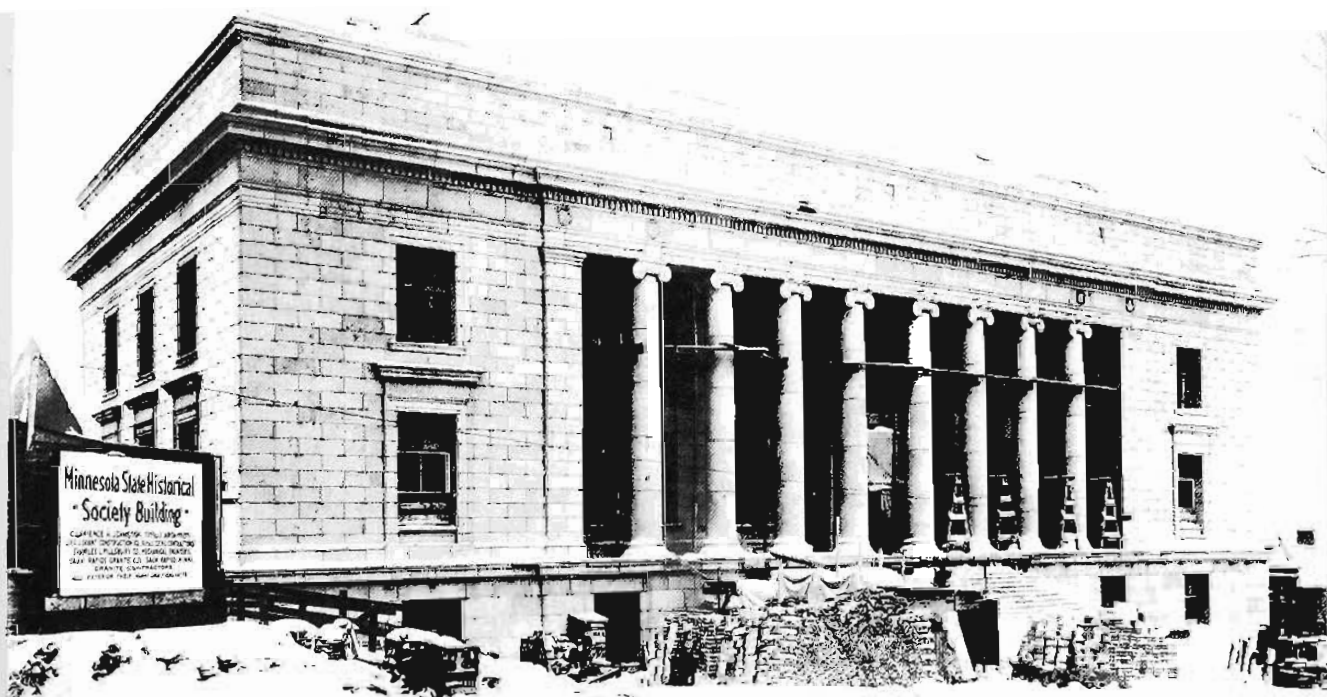
describing the circumstances of his discovery. The society then set up a committee to look into the authenticity of the stone. The committee, which did not include a single member familiar with runic symbols or with any Scandinavian language, pronounced it authentic. But the committee's report, while often cited as the society's official position, was never endorsed by its governing board. All of the society's secretaries over the years, including the present one, have remained skeptical of the claims made for the stone.

AS WAR CLOUDS gathered in Europe and World War I reached the farms and main streets of Minnesota, the state entered its most divisive and bitter period. The election of 1918 reflected these divisions. Minnesotans organized for war, and industrialization was accelerated. At this time the third cycle in the development of the Minnesota Historical Society got under way. A movement, advocated by Robertson as early as 1855, finally came to fruition when the institution attained its own building in 1917 — another choice critical to its future. The 1913 legislature passed a bill, which was amended in 1915, appropriating \$500,000 for a fireproof building on the condition that the society contribute \$75,000 for the site and furnishings. After some haggling within the executive council over the location, the society upheld its end of the bargain. Completed in 1917, the present Main Building was dedicated on May 11, 1918 — the sixtieth anniversary of Minnesota's admission to the Union.

The new building was a physical manifestation of the third major cycle. Although it was forced to share its new quarters with the state Department of Education until 1933, the MHS at last had a headquarters base. Now it could become more outgoing in its services to the public. Among those who felt that the state's oldest institution represented an unfulfilled promise was Guy Stanton Ford, professor of history and dean of the graduate school at the University of Minnesota. He persuaded the executive council to hire Solon J. Buck as the new superintendent in 1914. Over the next seventeen years, Buck made a lasting impact on the institution — an impact which endures to the present. In choosing him, the society's leaders made still another crucial choice. The first professional historian to head the society, Buck was a student of Frederick Jackson Turner. He turned the organization firmly away from its antiquarian past and toward new horizons. Recruiting young and able historians and librarians, Buck and his vigorous young staff ushered in an era of growth, scholarship, and achievement. For his assistant he chose Theodore C. Blegen. Others in the front line included editors Mary Berthel and Bertha Heilbron, manuscripts curator and author Grace Lee Nute, archaeologist Willoughby Babcock, and librarians Lois Fawcett and Esther Jerabek. This tal-



ON A SITE (left) east of the Capitol the present Historical Building was completed in 1917. Also shown are early and late construction scenes and a 1918 view (below) of the new structure's reading room.





SOLON J. BUCK, the first professional historian to head the MHS, took over in 1914 and made a lasting impact on the institution.

ented and dedicated group stressed not only collecting but providing professional care for the collections, a greater diffusion of information about state history to the public, high professional standards, and broader public service.

A master of detail, Buck insisted upon mistake-free publications and cataloging. In 1915 he launched the quarterly magazine, *Minnesota History*, and in the same year he annexed the state archives as a legitimate society function. In 1917 he began the first of a series of bimonthly children's programs, the forerunner of the present MHS education division. He also supervised the planned expansion of the manuscripts and library collections (the Ignatius Donnelly papers, for example, were received in 1914), began an archival survey, and made preservation of World War I records a special project.

Buck also expanded the society's focus beyond the Twin Cities. He encouraged the founding of county historical societies, held the first local history conference in 1921, and sparked a long and continuing effort to encourage history at the grass roots. When the MHS held its first summer tour and meeting in Duluth in 1922, only the St. Louis County Historical Society had been organized. By 1930 a total of sixteen local groups had been started. The 1922 Duluth meeting, by the way, was the first to be held outside the Twin Cities. It launched a successful tour program that was suspended during World War II, resumed in 1947, and greatly expanded in 1958.

In 1923 Buck inaugurated printed monthly news releases offering interesting bits of information on Minnesota history and also took advantage of that newfangled device known as "radio." For years thereafter, many of the society's twenty staff members were regularly engaged in "radioing," according to the monthly staff sheet

called the "Bugle." This meant that they gave regular radio talks on Minnesota history, an endeavor that continued into the 1930s. These outreach programs attracted new support for the institution. On the occasion of the society's seventy-fourth birthday on October 20, 1923, the *Minneapolis Journal* editorially commended it as "modern and forward looking. It is a conservator of local fact, tradition and color, indispensable to an understanding of the past and the promise of the State and Nation." By 1924 the MHS had 1,200 members.

And I should not neglect to mention another monumental achievement of the Buck era — the preparation and publication of William W. Folwell's four-volume *A History of Minnesota*, completed in 1930.

When Solon Buck resigned as superintendent in 1931 to continue a career that was to take him to the position of archivist of the United States, the society's annual budget had grown to about \$53,000. To no one's surprise, he was replaced as superintendent by Theodore Blegen. Scholarly and humane, TCB, as he was known, possessed a gift for making friends and inspiring others. He provided a happy complement to Buck's austere and autocratic administrative style. TCB continued Buck's basic policies while adding a number of innovations such as archaeological projects at Fort Ridgely and Grand Portage and a series of documentary publications. Under Blegen in the difficult decade of the Great Depression of the 1930s, the society acquired a WPA staff of thirty people that undertook newspaper, manuscripts, and historic sites surveys. A branch museum was established in the Fort Snelling Round Tower in 1939.

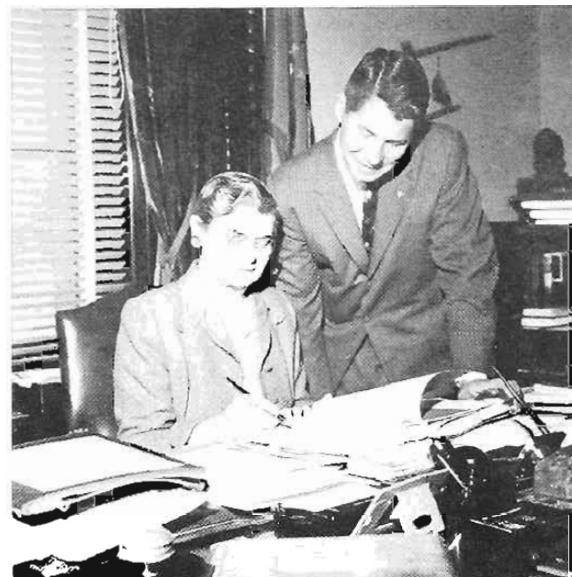
Blegen, like Buck before him, served as the society's superintendent on a half-time basis and held an academic appointment at the university as well. He left the society in 1939 only to return in 1960 as a research fellow for eight more highly productive and enjoyable years. The creative staff he and Buck assembled served the institution from World War I into the 1960s. Their legacy is the strong tradition of scholarship and dedication passed on to those of us who had the great benefit of knowing them as colleagues and friends.

BY 1950 MINNESOTA had shed its predominantly rural character for one that was industrialized and urbanized. The Twin Cities had become a metropolitan capital for a multistate region. The value of manufactured goods exceeded that of agricultural products. The great extractive industries of lumber, mining, and, to an extent, agriculture were supplanted by "brain" and service industries, and close to two-thirds of Minnesotans lived in urban areas.

The World War II period and the rest of the 1940s proved to be a difficult time in the life of cultural institutions in Minnesota and elsewhere. Arthur Larsen suc-



THEODORE C. BLEGEN
(left) succeeded Buck and led
the MHS during the difficult
1930s.

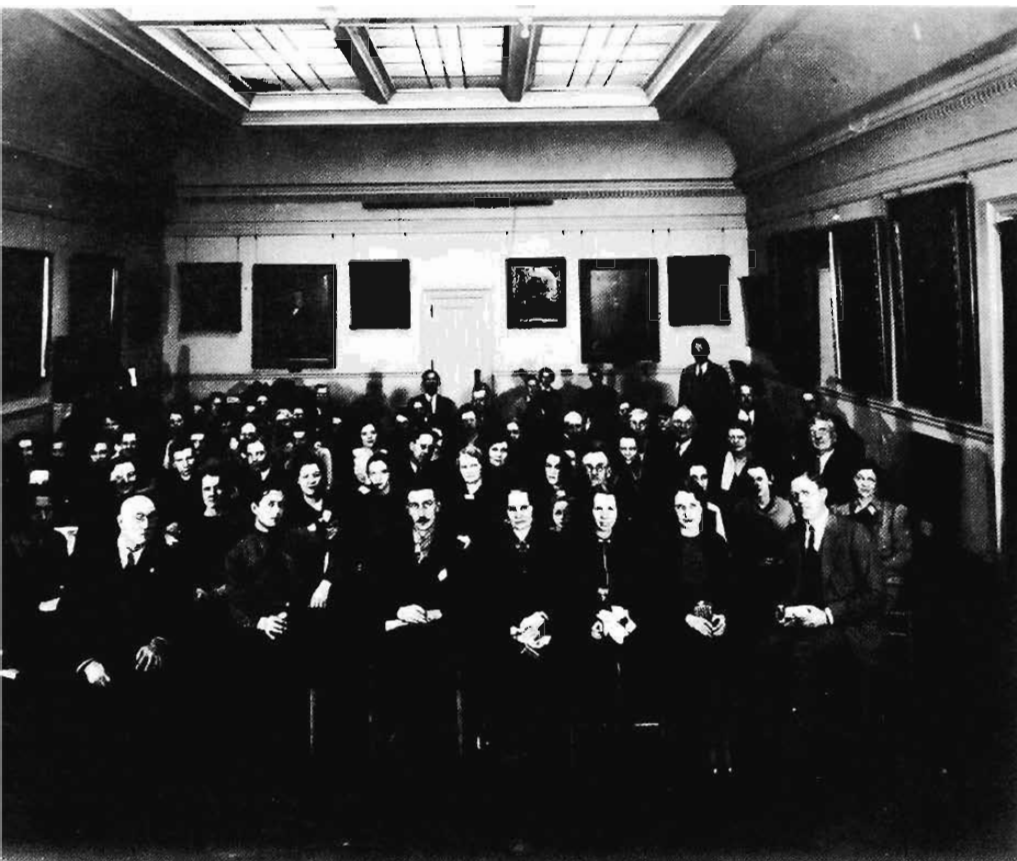


EDITORS Bertha L. Heilbron
(shown above in 1958 as she
autographed a copy of her *The
Thirty-Second State for Governor
Orville Freeman*) and Mary
Wheelhouse Berthel (below) were
important MHS staff members for
years, as was Willoughby Babcock
(left), one of whose positions was
newspaper curator.



LIBRARIANS Esther
Jerabek and Lois
Fawcett (right), who
served the MHS for
many years, are
pictured in 1956 with
James Taylor Dunn,
then head librarian,
in the library
"treasure room."





ARTHUR J. LARSEN
succeeded Blegen as
MHS superintendent
after the latter's
resignation in 1939. At
left is a rather sedate
MHS Christmas party in
1936.

ceeded Blegen as the first full-time MHS superintendent since Upham. But he soon departed for wartime service, and the turnover of four superintendents in nine years — Larsen, Lewis Beeson, Larsen again, and Carlton Qualey — coupled with budget cutbacks severely retarded the institution's initiatives. In spite of these obstacles there were impressive achievements. Grace Lee Nute's *The Voyageur's Highway* (still a best seller) was published in 1941, work on historical markers gave visibility to the state's history, and a junior historian program was launched in 1946 when the *Gopher Historian* magazine began to appear, at first in mimeographed form. A monthly newsletter for 1,979 members, the forerunner of the present *Minnesota History News*, also began publication in November, 1946. In the same year the Forest Products History Foundation was founded under MHS sponsorship. It went on to become a national organization, now headquartered in California. It should also be noted that as superintendent in 1948, Carlton Qualey made several important choices. He had the good judgment to name Lucile Kane as manuscripts curator. He also secured a full-time position to aid county historical societies, as well as funds to begin microfilming the MHS newspaper collection.

By the time the 100th anniversary of Minnesota Territory rolled around in 1949, World War II had ended,

and the nation was entering a period of unprecedented prosperity. To direct the society, Harold Dean Cater was chosen as superintendent in 1948. His directorship (he had the title changed from superintendent to director) can only be described as turbulent. Creative and energetic, he had a temperament incapable of enlisting support or confidence, so that his administration was flawed, as Smith's had been back in 1849. Cater's six years as director proved to be a sad era both for him and for the society. State archives was separated from the MHS. Staff morale was undermined, friends — including governors and legislators — were alienated, and a large budget deficit piled up. In yet another critical choice, President Carl W. Jones asked for and received Cater's resignation in 1954.

Nevertheless, this chaotic period was not by any means devoid of excitement. The territorial centennial brought increased, though temporary, resources; the staff doubled from twenty to forty, and membership rose to 2,500. It also brought the only president of the United States ever to visit the MHS, when Harry S. Truman came to the Main Building on November 3, 1949, in connection with the centennial celebration. A total of 141 people signed the visitors' register immediately after the president did so.

The year 1949 also saw the society continue to en-

large its constituencies. County historical societies were organized in all eighty-seven counties. The Women's Organization, founded that year under the leadership of Mrs. Vivian Weyerhaeuser, brought new vigor to the MHS museum program. In the next two years 3,500 people attended the opening of a successful exhibit on historical fashions, and 6,000 viewed an exhibit on children's toys during its first week. Both exhibitions were mounted with the help of the newly established Women's Organization, whose founder also provided the much-needed small auditorium we know as the Weyerhaeuser Room.

As a reflection of the society's increasing emphasis upon photos, paintings, and drawings as historical sources, a picture department was created in 1949 — the forerunner of today's audio-visual library. In 1952 the award-winning magazine *Minnesota History* was redesigned in a then-revolutionary illustrated format, reflecting editor Bertha Heilbron's pioneering interest in pictures as valuable sources. By 1952 the museum was offering regularly scheduled tours to school children for the first time. A full-time educational supervisor had been hired, the junior historian movement was in full swing, and the *Gopher Historian* had become a useful teaching tool under editor Hermina Poatgieter. Oral history came to the MHS in 1950 when Lucile Kane took a heavy wire recorder and interviewed a former lumberjack. Lucile also made one of the truly great discoveries of the twentieth century in 1953 when she found and recognized the papers of William Clark of Lewis and Clark fame in the attic of a St. Paul home. The MHS sponsored the first of its Teachers' Institutes that year, despite the fact that the post office had taken it into its head to declare that the society was not an educational institution, a ruling it reversed a year later.

NOW FOR the fourth cycle — the twenty years from 1958 to 1978. Perspective on the recent past is always difficult and especially so for one so intimately involved

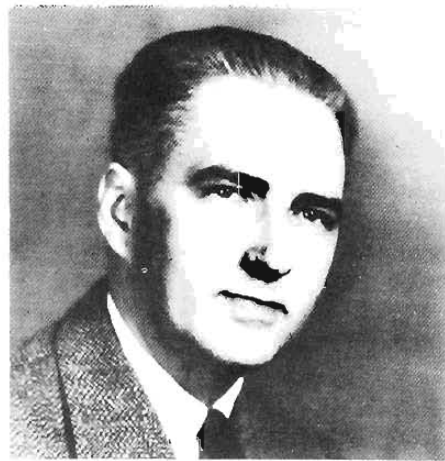
in the society during those years. Let me attempt a summary. I joined the society in 1953, succeeding Harold Cater as director two years later. The statehood centennial of 1958 may serve as a convenient starting point. Although the main thrust of the celebration was not toward history, it nevertheless provided momentum and resources for enduring efforts. I concluded my 1958 annual report with a statement that proved to be truer than I knew. I wrote that "More will be expected from the Society in the years ahead. If the institution is to effectively carry on the state-wide program expected of it, it must meet the challenge of finding increased support with which to carry on." If I could have foreseen the future, I would have been even more scared than I was then!

Perhaps the best way to sketch for you some of the differences between the MHS in 1958 and the MHS today is to list a few statistics: In 1958 we had 2,700 members. In 1978 the figure is 7,000. Company memberships, initiated in 1959, now total over 200. In 1958, some 3,800 readers used the library reference room — an all-time high up to that time. In 1978 the total was 10,600, and the library was open a full six days a week. In the same period, telephone inquiries jumped from 1,300 to 8,000; books used went from 19,000 to over 46,500.

In 1958 the manuscripts division had a total of three employees and served 373 readers. In 1978 the combined division of archives and manuscripts had twenty-three employees and served almost 4,000 patrons. Its accession figures are even more staggering. In 1978 it took in more manuscripts in one year than there were in the whole collection in 1958, and the division was discarding more than it kept in 1958. (The Humphrey papers and the records of the Northern Pacific and Great Northern railroads account for a good deal of the 1978 total.) Another measure of our expansion as a statewide institution may be seen in the number of field trips made by manuscripts personnel alone — fifty-seven in 1958 and 500 in 1978.



LEWIS
BEESON



CARLTON C.
QUALEY

HAROLD DEAN CATER (below) headed the society from 1948 to 1954. Among events during his turbulent six years were a farewell party (bottom, left) in 1950 for assistant director James Whitehead (behind the "good luck" sign) and various tours. At right tourers surround a "post-office" tree at the Old Crossing Treaty site in 1955, the year after Cater left.



LUCILE M. KANE (right), who became curator of manuscripts in 1948, discovered some William Clark papers in a St. Paul attic in 1953.



Evidence of change, and the aging of the collections, are also apparent in the newspaper microfilm program. In 1958, 700 rolls of film were made; in 1978 the figure was over 2,600.

Spectacular growth has also been registered by publications. Between 1849 and 1958 the MHS published only fifty-four titles. In the twenty years since 1958 we have issued 101 new books, plus prints, tape cassettes, postcards, picture packets, and puzzles. In 1958 the MHS published only one book *a year* at best; in 1978 it was publishing one book or pamphlet *per month*. In 1958 the average monthly sales of the society's publications totaled \$100; in 1978 the Minnesota Historical Society Press, established in 1975 under the direction of June D. Holmquist, averaged sales of over \$9,000 a month.

In 1958 a picture department existed but did not keep statistics of its production. In 1978 the audio-visual library made over 18,000 prints and negatives and included the voices of more than 1,000 Minnesotans on its oral history tapes.

In 1958 the MHS had a program for school children and teachers, dating back to the Buck era, but it did not as yet have a formal education division. In 1978 that division, established in 1967, published *Roots* magazine, was completing the publication of its third major curriculum unit, gave museum lessons to 15,500 school children, took over 75,000 persons on tours of the Capitol, and sponsored more than forty adult education programs throughout the state.

In 1958 the MHS had only one building on Cedar Street. It acquired its first historic site — the Le Duc House in Hastings — that year. In 1978 we are operating from four Twin Cities locations, including the Hill House, eight regional research centers, and twenty-eight historic sites. Altogether the MHS is now responsible for ninety-one buildings, plus tours and the historic preservation of the State Capitol.

In 1958 a centennial grant was received to begin an archaeological survey of Fort Snelling. In 1978 a \$4,500,000 restoration of the fort was completed, and a "living history" interpretive program had been in operation since 1970.

In 1958 the MHS had no staff in historic sites or archaeology. The first historic sites supervisor was hired in 1963 when only one site — Mille Lacs — was open, and historic preservation absorbed less than 10 per cent of the total budget. In 1978 the combined historic sites, field services, and archaeology division includes some seventy full-time people and over 100 part-time seasonal guides at twenty-two operating sites. Historic preservation now absorbs one-third of our total budget dollars.

In 1958 the MHS financed its programs from two sources — 80 per cent state funds and 20 per cent private funds. Those proportions have changed very little in twenty years. They now stand at 72 per cent state and 20

per cent private. But a new source — federal funds — now accounts for 8 per cent of our budget. Federal funds have increasingly aided historic preservation, and, on occasion, they have helped with microfilming, research, and publications projects. Major private gifts have become more frequent in the last twenty years as local foundations have developed as a welcome source of aid to the institution's financial health. The long tradition of individual generosity on the part of Minnesotans has also continued with such major bequests as the Ramsey House from Anna and Laura Furness (1964), the Mille Lacs Indian Museum from Harry and Jeanette Ayer (1959), and Grace Flandrau's bequest (1972). The latter established the Charles E. Flandrau Research Fund to finance staff sabbaticals.

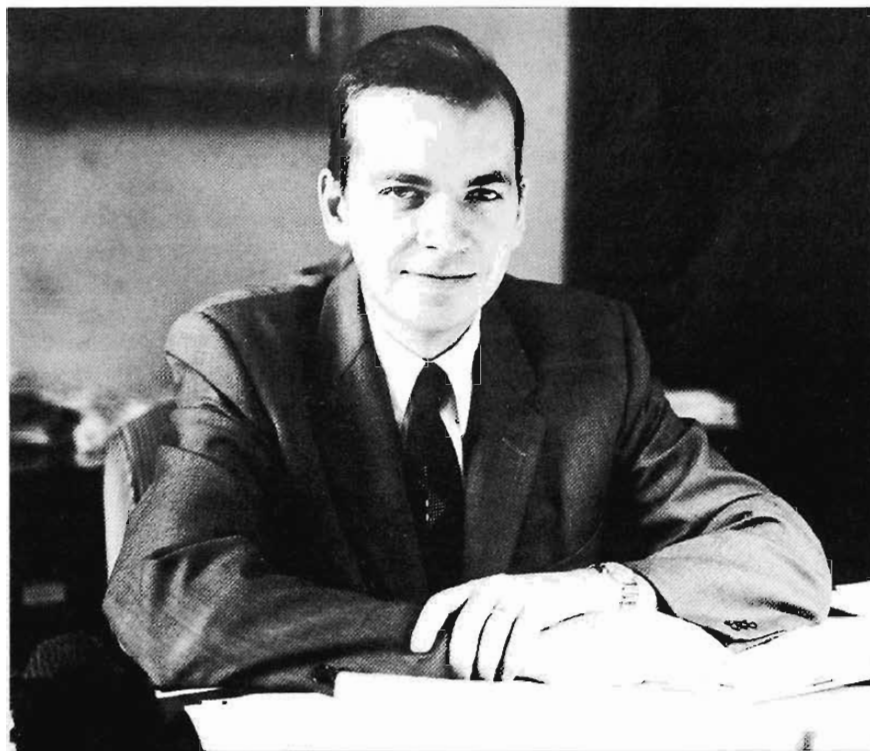
In 1958 the MHS regranted zero dollars to other organizations. What began as a \$25,000 program in 1969 had become a \$1,000,000 program eight years later. In 1978 the society regranted 17 per cent of its budget. The grants committee approved 144 projects in fifty counties this year. In 1958 Grand Portage became Minnesota's second national monument. By 1978 more than 400 Minnesota sites had been nominated to the National Register of Historic Places. And, finally, in 1958 the MHS had fifty-eight full-time people on its staff. This year it has 306.

Well, we've come a long way in 129 years, growing up with Minnesota. The first cycle saw the society launched as a quasi-public organization, blending the public and private sectors as bases of support — a situation unique to the midwestern species of historical society, by the way. This strong hybrid form was not characteristic of historical societies on either the East or the West coasts.

The second cycle saw the organization intensifying its search for a permanent home, moving toward a full-time staff, building its collections with a strong bent toward antiquarianism and archaeology, and helped by a supreme court ruling on the legal nature of the animal. The court elaborated upon the original concept of the society as an independent organization carrying out a state purpose. This interpretation was reiterated by the Minnesota attorney general in 1944 and by legislation enacted in 1976.

The third cycle witnessed the society emerging as a force in the life of Minnesota. It acquired a new building and a professional staff with a forward-looking view of history. Scholarly and collecting functions retained their primacy, but new programs were designed to attract a broader public.

The fourth cycle brought that broader public to our doorstep by the hundreds of thousands. We have seen tremendously increased citizen interest, the assumption of several state functions, and a broadened concept of history and the role of the society. Major divisions of the



A YOUTHFUL Russell W. Fridley succeeded Cater as director in 1955 and has presided over spectacular growth of the MHS since. One area that has mushroomed is manuscript collections — in part because of acquisition of the papers of Hubert H. Humphrey. The senator is shown (below, right) with records analyst Kathryn A. Johnson as he reviewed cataloguing of his papers during a visit to the MHS Records Center in April, 1973.



FRIDLEY assisted the British Broadcasting Company crew that made a documentary film on the Kensington rune stone in August, 1973. At right: In 1959 MHS staff members wore fancy hats for a songfest during a Christmas party.



institution became more important in shaping programs and delivering their services beyond the Twin Cities to individuals as well as county and local groups. Interpretation of Minnesota's past through sites, publications, exhibits, films, and lectures has grown markedly since 1958. The society now counts members and sells its publications in all of the state's eighty-seven counties, in every state of the Union, and in at least ten foreign countries.

WHAT OF THE FUTURE? As the public mood toward support of cultural institutions shifts downward, the Minnesota Historical Society perhaps is entering a fifth cycle. We are entering, I believe, another era of critical choices, and I have a hunch they will not be the easy ones between champagne and caviar, but rather more basic ones that will be hard and pinching. I am afraid I have more questions than answers about the shape of the immediate future, but let me share some of them with you.

(1) The leveling off of growth will force us to order our priorities more rigorously and to choose between competing worthwhile projects. This will be particularly true, I believe, in the field of historic sites preservation — a cycle I think has reached its peak. The society's roster of historic sites is virtually complete, and I believe that economic realities will sharply limit this field in the future.

(2) More of the society's financial resources must be invested in conserving the nonrenewable resources of the collections themselves. As age and intensive public use wear out the manuscripts, books, and newspapers, we are in danger of losing the historical thread the institution has spent thirteen decades in assembling. Just as thousands of visitors to a wilderness destroy it, thousands of readers wear out even the sturdiest of paper documents.

The question is: How do we preserve the records, books, and pieces of Minnesota's past — the core of the collections upon which the institution's multiple services to the public rest — so that they will be here in the year 2000? Time alone destroys fragile museum objects in storage areas subject to dust, lack of humidity controls, ultraviolet light, pollution, and scores of other common dangers.

(3) Is there to be a new state historical museum? The greatest number of people come to the society to view the thousands of items five generations have generously given for exhibition. Many are disappointed. The Mechanic Arts High School site, which may soon be available adjoining the Main Building, opens up a fresh opportunity to pursue this long-sought, elusive goal.

(4) What direction should the society's services take? The dynamic growth of the MHS since 1958 has altered its character. It is less a St. Paul and now more truly a

statewide institution. Should this trend continue? In what form should aid to others be given — grants and technical assistance? As more and more local organizations proliferate, it becomes increasingly difficult for one organization to minister to the needs of upwards of 300 separate groups. Should this proliferation be discouraged? Can more pooling and sharing result in a wider division of labor? For the day is long past when the state society alone can preserve an adequate record of Minnesota's people.

(5) What about the society's continuing involvement in furthering the preservation of historic structures, including whole complexes of them? Has historic preservation turned away from its historical roots, abandoned any attempt at quality control and selectivity, and instead become a housing and environmental effort better adapted to a government agency?

(6) Undoubtedly the Minnesota Historical Society will continue its original mission as keeper of the conscience of the state and local history movement in Minnesota. It will be called upon, as it has been repeatedly, to oppose the commercialization and perversion of history. Inevitably, the society, through its professional staff, will be asked to render judgments on controversies generated by "one issue" historians. Whether it is the question of who was the true discoverer of the source of the Mississippi — as William Morrison in 1856 and Willard Glazier in 1887 asked the society to set aside Schoolcraft's claim and validate theirs — or repeated pressures to authenticate the Kensington rune stone inscription, the society's paramount duty is to keep the historical record accurate, up-to-date, and informed by the best and most recent scholarship.

(7) Where is that scholarship coming from, and what form will it take? What is the future of historical study in a world of aging source materials, declining literacy, and "instant" history? The twentieth-century scholar is faced with a bewildering volume and proliferation of sources on the one hand and a total lack of them on the other. Paper records threaten to engulf us, while many vital facts spoken over the telephone never find their way into the written record. Will the solitary scholar live long enough to tackle a large research project requiring the use of hundreds of microfilmed newspapers and thousands of pages of records and computer printouts? Is the day of broad individual scholarship ending? The society's current Minnesota Ethnic History Project, for example, started in 1973. So far it has involved dozens of scholars and required combined state, federal, and private funding. Will future research require such team efforts as well as greater use of sampling techniques?

(8) What are the implications for the society as the place of history erodes in the curriculum and disappears from many classrooms as it is displaced by "relevant" subjects? Faced with this situation the society's respon-

sibility to teach Minnesota history becomes even more critical.

These are some of the major issues that will surely challenge us as well as the next generation of society leaders and supporters.

During much of this talk I have been moving back and forth between means and ends. Let us not confuse them. The basic purposes of the society remain unchanging — to collect, preserve, and interpret the Minnesota story. The means of achieving these ends have undergone drastic change over 130 years. Our techniques have multiplied, and they will certainly continue to do so. The historical record is no longer contained on a bookshelf and in a "cabinet of curiosities" in the basement of the State Capitol. And it will continue to change whether it is purveyed through copying machines or computer printouts, video tape, micropublications, or preserved log cabins, or microwave towers.

So that we are not overwhelmed by the seeming magnitude of our task, it is important that we keep in mind the distinction between ends and means. Our society traces its intellectual origins in a direct line to what Benjamin Franklin had in mind in 1743 when he offered his fellow Americans "A Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge Among the British Plantations in America." He had in mind a society that would enhance the intellectual life of the colonies. The frontier Minnesotans

held a similar vision a century later when Charles Smith and his associates founded the Minnesota Historical Society. The ultimate test of how well the MHS has fulfilled that vision is whether all of its complex projects and programs advance the ends of the greater society and raise the quality of intellectual life for Minnesotans. The ultimate end and goal of our institution has seldom been stated better than by the *Wall Street Journal* of August 18, 1975, in an editorial entitled "History Isn't Bunk." The *Journal* said: "The fundamental importance of learning history is not to keep a lid on dissent and protest. . . . It is important because civilization advances as one era builds and improves upon the past. Therefore to remain ignorant of what has gone before is to risk repeating the errors of the past and diminishing the promise of the future." That's what I think our work is all about.

ALL THE PHOTOGRAPHS used with this report are in the audio-visual library of the Minnesota Historical Society. Some require special credit. The three construction pictures on p. 137, including the "before" shot at upper left, are by C. J. Hubbard. The photographs of Solon J. Buck on p. 138 and that of Willoughby Balcock on p. 139 are from the *St. Paul Dispatch*, that of the librarians on p. 139 from the *Minneapolis Tribune*, that of Carlton C. Qualey on p. 141 by Aletier Von Behr of New York. The tree picture on p. 142 is from the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*. The picture at left center on p. 144 was taken by Robert C. Wheeler.

Call for Papers

Minnesota Historical Society

130th Annual Meeting and History Conference

Minneapolis, Minnesota

October 26–27, 1979

PAPERS should deal with some aspect of twentieth-century Minnesota or Upper Midwest history. Special consideration will be given to those who emphasize materials to be found in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. Presentations should be not less than fifteen or longer than forty minutes. Speakers will receive honoraria and expenses. Please submit a short summary of the paper, a brief explanation of research materials, and a brief personal resumé. Proposals should be sent to:

Nancy Eubank, Program Chairman
Minnesota Historical Society
Building 25, Fort Snelling
St. Paul, Minn. 55111



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