

# Women's History Resources at the Minnesota Historical Society

Sue E. Holbert

**T**he Minnesota Historical Society intends to strengthen its commitment to women's history by establishing a Women's History Program in the institution, according to society director Nina M. Archabal. She and Lt. Governor Marlene Johnson spoke at a program focusing on women's history held in St. Paul in April. The spring announcement was the result of several years of discussion by a 27-member Women's History Center Task Force appointed by Governor Rudy Perpich and headed by the lieutenant governor, and by a working committee consisting of four task force members (one from the MHS staff), three additional staff members, and a member of the society's executive council. The working committee recommended the creation of a women's history specialist position and an advisory board that would include experts and advocates from the community. The society will examine funding needs of those recommendations and hopes to present this new initiative for legislative review.<sup>1</sup>

In discussion of the proposal to augment women's history efforts, it became clear that the society's staff also sees a need to be more aggressive in collecting and making available research resources reflecting the lives and contributions of people of color and of other minority persons and groups in society. The director and staff members expressed their dedication to seeing that

the women's history effort and other activities reflect the variety of cultures among Minnesota's women. They also determined to pursue attempts to increase public awareness of the history of the state's women and of the substantial collections the society has gathered over the years that document the experience of women. To that end, a two-year Women's History Research and Grants Project, funded by the state legislature, is now under way. It is directed by public historian Jo Blatti, who will complete an annotated bibliography of published works on women of Minnesota and the surrounding region during the first year. The second phase of the project will make available grants to support research and writing about women's history in this area.

"Women were long invisible, or nearly so, to American historians," Barbara Stuhler and Gretchen Kreuter wrote in the introduction to *Women of Minnesota*, published by the society in 1977. They attributed the rise in interest in the historical experience of women to the resurgence of a women's movement in the 1960s, probably stimulated by the social upheaval of that decade. Various definitions of women's history have prevailed—or coexisted—in the years since. Some have questioned the validity of the specialization entirely, viewing it as a political and ideological Trojan horse for feminism. Much of the current discussion of women's studies and women's history focuses on a desire to get

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<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful to many colleagues in the society and others who have been engaged in contemplating a new Women's History Program for their contributions to this article.

the insights and findings of a quarter century of scholarship, particularly the concept of gender as a basic analytic framework, into the "mainstream." Proponents claim that integration of this new knowledge and these new perspectives into other disciplines and programs will be transforming. Kenneth Keniston of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology summarized the potential revolutionary impact by pointing to the sweeping shifts that occurred with the introduction of Freud's and Marx's theories into the fields of psychology and sociology.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever one's definitions or views, history (or literature or philosophy) as the story of great white men is seriously challenged. There are more than 450 women's studies programs on United States campuses. Curriculum revisions in several institutions of higher education that would incorporate works by women, nonwhite, and non-Western authors into reading lists have caused a great stir. Curriculum revision is under way in the lower grades as well: in Minnesota, for instance, the department of education required all public school districts to file plans by July 1, 1990, to establish and maintain an "inclusive education program." Programs were to be "multicultural and gender-fair." The department called for attention to the historical and contemporary contributions of women and men, with special emphasis on the contributions of women. Plans also were to indicate how the schools would assist students to develop understanding and appreciation of minority and ethnic groups and handicapped persons.

The events and trends noted above make it especially timely to highlight some of the women's history materials in the society's collections.

IN 1849, nineteen leading citizens sought incorporation of the Minnesota Historical Society by the Minnesota Territorial Legislature. Needless to say, these founders were men. The charter authorized the society to do all things necessary to "illustrate and perpetuate the history and settlement of said Territory." An 1856 amendment to the charter cited the collection and preservation of "publications, manuscripts, antiquities, curiosities, and other things" as among the objectives of the society. In its first six or seven decades, the institution built creditable collections of newspapers, books, pamphlets and other published materials. It solicited and accepted (rather uncritically, it appears) EVERYTHING RELATING TO OUR OWN STATE, as an 1872 appeal for contributions announced. If truth be told, some of the curiosities and antiquities emanated from far beyond Minnesota's borders. There were regis-

tered 577 museum artifacts by 1912, many of them archaeological and ethnological but including some items of "domestic interest." By that date, several thousand manuscripts had been accepted also. Most of them were valuable to Minnesota history, but some were not, such as "map of Pensacola navy yard" and "facsimile edition of Domesday Book." While approximately 40 women had donated manuscripts items, only seven or eight of the collections of letters, reminiscences, or records, plus some genealogical materials, were concerned with women or women's activities. Strong topics in those early collections were military and Indian affairs and politics.

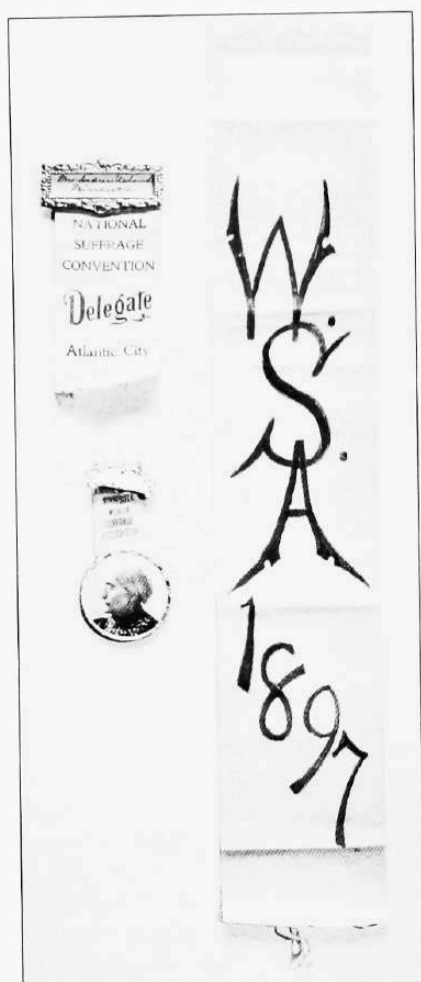
With a move to the historical society building at 690 Cedar Street in 1917, the separation of various collections units from the library, the appointment of a series of society directors with an interest in the collections—particularly in manuscripts—and the coming of high-energy, professional curators (many female), the MHS became increasingly active and selective in collecting. Yet by 1935 when the first guide to the personal papers was published, only five dozen collections of 455 were listed under the names of women. An entry describing a set of questionnaire responses sent to the society by early settlers and prominent citizens listed no women; a description of autograph letters mentioned one: Julia Ward Howe, not a Minnesotan at that!

Institutional records and memories indicate that a deliberate effort to collect women's history materials was not made until the 1970s. The collections acquired earlier, however, were not devoid of materials by and about women and their lives. Items throughout the collections—household goods, apparel, postcards, trademarks of Minnesota companies, books on deportment, and family letters, for instance—provide useful evidence about women and cover the span of Minnesota history. Archaeological artifacts can tell about the living situations and relationships of prehistoric peoples; objects and crafts document Indian women's work up to the present.

Identification and description of collections reflect contemporary biases; it is not surprising that the society's earlier finding aids used descriptors that did not satisfy later-day research needs. Catalogers, like society generally, were blind to many subjects. Furthermore, researchers today would find many of the index terms that were used to be offensive or laughable. Thus those who describe and catalog materials in the society's holdings continually are concerned with reanalyzing the collections, recataloging them, and cross-referencing between new terms and old. New awareness of women as donors and subjects of collections and of other research interests and methodologies has led to the uncovering of previously unidentified sources for the study of women, of families, of gender roles, and a

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Keniston, "Wife Beating and the Rule of Thumb," *New York Times Book Review*, May 8, 1988, p. 12.



*Women's  
Suffrage  
Association  
ribbon, button,  
and sash from  
the MHS  
collections*

variety of other history topics. Not only are the collecting departments of the society concentrating now upon acquiring additional research resources for the study of women's history, they are still reviewing existing resources and improving access to them.

### *Museum Collections*

MANY donors to the museum collections are women, and many of the 100,000 items in the collection are relevant for the study of women's history—in business and politics as well as in the home. Objects document the lives of ordinary people as well as the rich and famous. The donation of products, equipment, catalogs, business records, and other materials by Munsingwear, Inc., Minneapolis, provides rich documentation on women in the labor force and as consumers. Munsingwear employed the largest number of females in the state for 25 years and was known as a progressive company in regard to its working conditions.

Other objects in the collection tell about women in business as milliners, dressmakers, and needleworkers. For example, 18 items of clothing, display cabinets, and paper files are associated with Young-Quinlan. Elizabeth C. Quinlan operated this Minneapolis women's store and is credited with fostering the acceptance of ready-to-wear clothing by Minnesota's society women. Custom embroidery work, patterns, sketches, and tools document the LeDuc sisters' embroidery business in Hastings, the Fjelde sisters' custom embroidery shop, and Louise Mueller's work at her family's St. Paul dry goods store.

Representing women in other occupations are items from the dental office of Drs. Walter and Ruth Jones (she was a 1921 graduate of the University of Minnesota College of Dentistry); a hair dryer dating from about 1926 from an early Minneapolis beauty salon operated by Anna M. Sword; opera costumes from about 1915 of Beatrice Gjertsen-Bessesen, who organized musical conservatories in Albert Lea and Minneapolis; and costumes and a melodeon used by the family-operated Andrews Opera Company of St. Peter. The collections include family and ethnographic materials from Frances Densmore, a noted ethnomusicologist who specialized in the study of American Indian music from the late 1800s to her death in 1957; a balloon flight suit and a chasuble of Jeannette Piccard, the first woman to pilot a stratospheric balloon (1934) and one of the first women ordained as a priest in the Episcopal church (1974). Other objects have been donated by many governors' wives; by Muriel Humphrey Brown, former United States senator and advocate for mentally handicapped people; and by Joan A. Mondale, potter and contemporary crafts supporter.<sup>3</sup>

Museum collections staff members are working actively to acquire the creations of state inventors. This endeavor has led to the addition of the "Minnesota Loom" developed by Hilma Berglund, longtime professor at the University of Minnesota and a founding member of the Weavers Guild of Minnesota; a patented shampoo bag by Josie Wanous, the first woman pharmacist in the state; garment patents by Ruth Kapinas of Munsingwear, Inc., and a patented needle-threader by Lilly Mae Widmark of Minneapolis.

<sup>3</sup> Note that although the collections are described under the administrative categories employed by the society, items by or about any one woman, organization, or topic may be present in several or all of the collections. This would be true of materials of Frances Densmore, for instance; they are found in the library, archives and manuscripts, and sound and visual materials holdings as well as in the museum collections. A centralized, automated catalog envisioned for the future would bring these collections together intellectually if not into the same storage rooms.

The society has an outstanding clothing collection. In recent years, shawls, capes, and mantles were used in the MHS exhibit, "Wrapped in Style"; other apparel was exhibited in "The Clothes Off Our Backs." The clothing is studied regularly by researchers and loaned to other museums for exhibit. More than 100 garments represent the work of 30 different Minnesota dressmakers. The most extensive dressmaker collections are from the shops of Mary Molloy, St. Paul, and Rose Boyd, Minneapolis. There are examples of women's uniforms worn when performing war work in nonmilitary service organizations such as the Red Cross and in various branches of the armed services. The collections also include uniforms worn by airline flight attendants as well as household servants. Further strengthening the clothing collection are examples of 19th-century Swedish-American farm clothing and handwoven and knitted garments from Armenian and Finnish immigrants. Many of Minnesota's prominent families are represented in the collection by articles of their clothing; these include the LeDuc, Hill, Loring, Weyerhaeuser, Pillsbury, and Folwell families.

Quilts, handicrafts, and textiles are particular strengths of the collection. Objects include needlework done by Jane Grey Swisshelm, abolitionist, feminist, and early St. Cloud newspaper editor; an 1859 Minnesota State Fair prize-winning quilt; and a sampler by Harriet Bishop, St. Paul's first schoolteacher. The collections have clothing and domestic items of beadwork, quillwork, embroidery, and weaving representing the life and work of Minnesota Dakota and Ojibway women. Among recent acquisitions are a woven basket by Karen KaKayGeesick, an Ojibway basket maker, and a jingle dress made by Mary Big Wind and covered birch-bark basket made by BeBe Earth, both Ojibway women from Mille Lacs.

Other handicrafts include the extraordinary china cabinet and bedroom suite made by Byrdie Kraft in high school shop class in 1915, hand-wrought metalwork and pottery by Gladys Pattee, student at the Minneapolis Handicraft Guild; pottery by Clara Mairs, Minnesota artist; carved wood lake trout by Donna Tonelli, professional decoy carver; and works by Jo Anne Bird, a Dakota artist, and Evelyn Raymond, well-known Minnesota sculptor. Painted china is sought actively, and the collection contains examples by several women including Lucile McKusick Stephenson of Minneapolis.

The computerization of collections association data (who used or made an object, where, and when) now in progress will add to the ways in which researchers can gain access to artifacts. Handouts are available to aid research in the textile collection and on the care, display, and storage of textiles. In light of the recent discussions within the society on women's history re-

sources, the museum collections indexes and other finding aids specifically note all objects relating to women. Museum collections curator Marcia Anderson notes that although "women" are represented broadly, there are certain races, classes, ethnic groups, and regions of the state that are not as well represented in the society's holdings. County and local historical societies and other museums and institutions compensate for some of these weaker areas of MHS collections, but the society continues to try to eliminate these gaps.



*Sound and Visual Materials*

WOMEN are depicted in many of the 250,000 photographs in the society's collections, and they may have taken many of the amateur and family photos. Unfortunately, before 1970 the photographer was not always credited in MHS records. Among the notable collections of amateur photographers' work are those of Sadie Mason Ray and Delia E. Chaney of St. Paul. Photo albums often were created by women, and the collections contain a good selection. Although until recently there have been few female professional photographers, MHS does hold photographs taken by some such as Esther Jos Erickson of St. Paul and Anna G. (Mrs. John) Oleson of Minneapolis. The work of women is better represented among the fine art photographs, which MHS currently seeks. Recent additions include the work of nine photographic artists including Virginia Danfelt of Hovland.

Photographs of business and professional women at work include those of Gertrude Smith Stanton, ophthalmologist, and Olga Lentz, dentist. Certain workplaces where women commonly were employed are underrepresented, but common among the holdings are photos of factory workers (especially in textile industries), secretaries, nurses, and teachers. Archives of newspaper photos at MHS (dating after the 1940s) contain many views of women at work and in all kinds of activities and situations. There is considerable documentation of volunteer work, and the collection is rich in its depictions of Indian women.

Fifty thousand portraits of Minnesotans are indexed by the individual's name. In addition, a card catalog provides subject access to the photographs. A researcher who thinks of the many arenas in which women can be found will have little difficulty in finding relevant material.

Oral history tapes and transcripts also provide extensive information on women's lives. Several special



collecting projects have resulted in production of oral history tapes, acquisition of related materials, and identification of existing resources in MHS or elsewhere that document the topics at hand. An oral history of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Minnesota branch, is in the holdings, and a recent project to document radicalism in Minnesota includes the role of women. For example, there are interviews with Grace Carlson and Bertha Weiss.

Other examples of oral history are the Mexican-American and Black History projects (1975–1976 and 1974–1975 respectively). Probably half of the interviews were with women or jointly with husband and wife. Among those interviewed were María Rangel Morán, founder of Ballet Folklórico Guadalupeño on St. Paul's West Side; Felicitas L. Herrera, who told of her life in Minnesota and Mexico, and Guadalupe J. Cruz, on the founding of Our Lady of Guadalupe Society in St. Paul and other topics. Many of the organizations documented were strongly associated with women (for instance, Stella Alvo discussed Mi Cultura, a day-care center). The Black History Project acquired records of women's organizations and organizations spearheaded by women; it also recorded interviews with women such as Carrie L. Dozier, a longtime resident of Duluth, and Nellie Stone Johnson, labor and political activist in Minneapolis. In the resource guide resulting from this project, the society's portraits of black Minnesotans are listed; many are women.

The guide to MHS oral history collections (1984) reports many interviews by and about women and their activities. It has an index entry for "women," as well as listing many women's names and organizations. Author entries include brief citations as to topic of the interview or occupation of the narrator, such as "Rud, Lula (Mrs. Ole), farmer."

The society also holds many films and videos by women or on topics of particular relevance to women's history. Among them are three films produced by Women Historians of the Midwest; a print of "The Willmar Eight," documenting the women's strike against the Willmar Bank; and a film produced by Dionisa Cárdenas Coates entitled "Minnesotas Mexicanos." There is also a taped interview with Ms. Coates.

The art collections and exhibits document women in various ways. Nationally and internationally known Minnesota artists are represented; some of them are Wanda Gág, Clara Mairs, Josephine Lutz Rollins, and portraitist Grace McKinstry. The society also has manuscripts collections of Gág, Mairs, and Rollins. Women are depicted in portraits and other works. Records of the Women's Art Registry of Minnesota are in the manuscripts collections and work by members of WARM is in the art collection. Art curator Thomas O'Sullivan is compiling data on the life and works of Minnesota art-

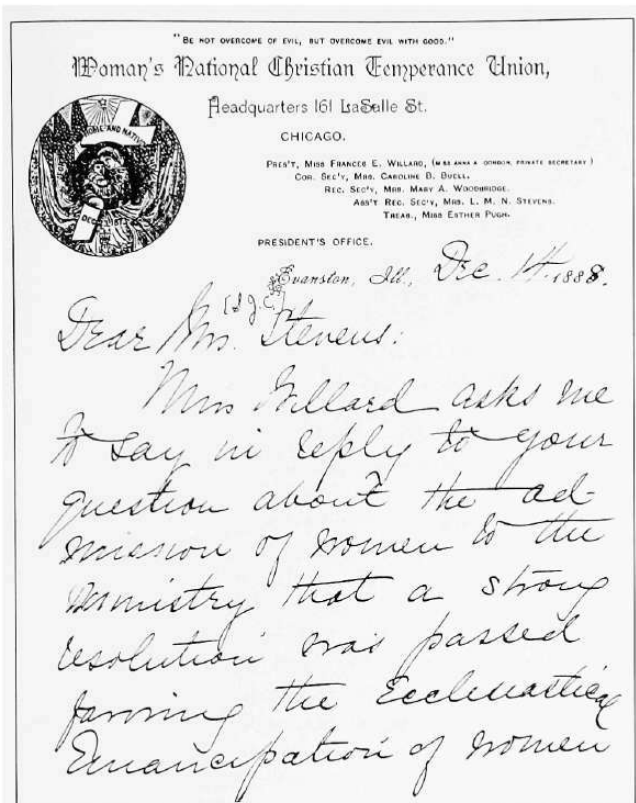
ists, and access to the art collections is provided by name of artist, title of work, and subject headings. Library staff member Kay Spangler recently created a database containing the names of about 5,000 Minnesota artists (including many women) and of information about annual and biennial art exhibitions held in the state between 1900 and 1970. Access to this information is through the library.

Minnesota women have figured more consistently and more prominently as musicians than they have in other creative fields. The list ranges from the Hutchinson and Andrews families of the 19th century, the Milch sisters at the turn of the century, the popular Andrews sisters in the middle of this century, to contemporary performers such as Prudence Johnson and Shirley Witherspoon. The collections contain sheet music, biographies, and photographs associated with women who were performing before World War II. The voices and works of more recent artists can be heard on some of the 425 long-playing and 78 r.p.m. records, cassettes, and compact discs in the rapidly growing music collection. Performers and composers are indexed by individual or group name on the PALS (Project for Automated Library Systems) computer database.

### *Archives and Manuscripts*

AS IS TRUE with all of the collections in MHS, the topic of women in the 75,000 cubic feet of archives and manuscripts is too extensive to comprehend in a brief summary. Much of the 19th- and early 20th-century collecting focused on important men and on male-dominated institutions. Among the earliest manuscripts in MHS are those documenting the fur trade and missionary work, in which women played a role. The materials contain information about women's lives, although much of it is obscured by 19th-century prejudices in recordkeeping and male-centered collection titling and description. The early materials also contain information on the life of women at Fort Snelling in the 19th and 20th centuries. Among the few collections of women's papers listed in a 1935 guide are those of Abby Abbe Fuller, an early settler in St. Paul, and Maria Sanford, a professor at the University of Minnesota from 1881 to 1909. (Guides published in 1955 and 1977 show many more collections created by or revolving around women.)

Women's history sources have been targeted for special effort in collecting and description since the early 1970s. In 1978 MHS employed a historian to assess the holdings so as to identify material by and about women that was not included in earlier descriptions. This project was spurred by a request to submit entries for a



A letter from temperance leader Frances Willard's secretary to Sarah Jane Christie Stevens, in the MHS manuscripts collections

guide subsequently published in 1979, *Women's History Sources: A Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States*. Some 1,200 entries were submitted, of which about half were used; this constituted the second greatest number of entries for a single repository in the country. The unpublished entries later were edited and they are available for use at the society. Grant funding was used to conduct a Women's History Collecting Project in 1981–82. The co-ordinator contacted 160 potential donors and during the grant period 45 major collections were acquired. Since then, more than 100 collections pertinent to women's history studies have been added, plus numerous genealogical materials, biographical resources, and reminiscences.

Collections of note in the society include those of women in public life and politics (for instance, Carrie S. Jorgens Fosseen, a Republican party officer; Eugenie M. Anderson, ambassador to Denmark and minister to Bulgaria; Arvonne S. Fraser, a leader in women's issues in the U.S. and internationally; and Marlene Johnson, Minnesota lieutenant governor); in civic and social welfare and reform (Catherine Cooke Gilman, Fanny Fligelman Brin, Genevieve Fallon Steefel, all of Minneapolis); in business (Linda James Benitt, farmer;

Elizabeth N. Scott, theater owner-manager). Women in professional life, the trades, and service occupations are represented: for example, Judge Suzanne Sedgewick; labor leader Tobey Lappako; policewoman Ethel Ray Nance; and Celia Tauer, Lena Peterson, and Clara Hasslin, servants at the Hill House in St. Paul. Nursing, education, and homemaking are exceptionally well represented. Women's participation in the arts and cultural life is documented in such collections as those of writer Meridel Le Sueur; artist Alice E. Hugy; poet Margarette Ball Dickson; and composer Gertrude Sans Souci. Lives of immigrant women and their families and friends abroad are illuminated in correspondence such as that of Matilda Shillock, who was born in East Prussia and moved to the U.S. in 1854 (the letters continue to 1905 and are almost entirely in German) and of Anna Abramovna Puzyriskaya Zon, who left Russia with her husband in 1898 (letters date to 1949 and are in Russian and other languages). The Shillock letters have been translated as have some of the Zon.

Records of hundreds of organizations built around a multitude of interests and concerns and covering the span of Minnesota history contribute immeasurably to the availability of sources on women. A few examples are "ladies' auxiliaries" of churches and fraternal orders; unions such as Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union, Local No. 21, St. Paul, and Minnesota Federation of Teachers; civic, philanthropic, educational, and social groups like League of Women Voters chapters and the Minnesota Federation of Women's Clubs; business-related organizations like the Business and Professional Women's Association of St. Paul, Minnesota Jaycee Women, Minnesota Women for Agriculture, and women-owned businesses such as Richards Treat (a restaurant-cafeteria) and Calamity J. Contracting, Inc.; literary and theatrical groups like the New Century Club and Circle of the Witch; community services and shelters including Babies Home of St. Paul, Hallie Q. Brown and Phyllis Wheatley settlement houses, Jewish Family and Children's Services of Minneapolis, American Refugee Committee, and Guadalupe Area Project; patriotic bodies like the Daughters of the American Revolution; sororities such as Alpha Kappa Alpha; religious affiliations like the Episcopal Church Women, Diocese of Minnesota; and advocacy groups including Minnesota Feminists for Life, Coalition for Freedom of Choice, Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association of Minneapolis, Minnesota National Organization for Women, and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Minnesota.

In addition to the published guides to manuscripts noted earlier, a number of other finding aids have been published on certain topics or collections. There are unpublished descriptions of all collections. Computer-

Efforts to acquire papers and records pertinent to women's history continue to receive high priority. Of especial interest and concern are the papers of minority women and their organizations. The State Historical Records Advisory Board, an organization that advocates the preservation of valuable papers, records, and other documentary materials in Minnesota and recommends grant projects for this purpose, also recently placed on its priority list for statewide action development of collections relating to women's history and the sharing of information about these materials.

Ongoing entry of information on all of the archives' holdings into a national computerized database is providing access through agency names, subject headings, and other routes, and hard-copy inventories of the records are available in the archives-manuscripts reference facility. There is no up-to-date published guide to State Archives.

LIBRARY materials and newspapers obviously contain resources for women's history. Family, county, and local histories; organizational histories; and city directories are among sources available. The library buys all books by and about Minnesota women and selectively purchases books on women's history topics and methodology. MHS is collecting romance novels written by Minnesota women, and it holds poetry, children's literature, cookbooks, and other materials of special interest. The library also holds extensive biographical

*A page from Father Augustin Ravoux's 1843  
Dakota-language prayer book, probably the first  
book printed by a Minnesotan*

It is hoped that this brief look at the vast and diverse array of resources will encourage contributions to the collections, spark research, and provide new ideas for exhibits and other public and interpretive activities. Use of these sources, of course, is not limited to "women's history" endeavors, but can contribute to all sorts of topics and purposes.

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