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Article Summary: A state historical society has three functions: the collection of historical material; its preservation, classification, and indexing; and the dissemination of the historical information. (Hafen presented this address at the 1945 meeting of NSHS and the Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska.)

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The Work of a State Historical Society*

LEROY R. HAFEN

History is of vital concern to us all. A person cannot fully understand the present unless he knows something of the past. Just as a physician stresses the importance of securing the history of a case in order to make a proper diagnosis, so students of our present civilization must seek in the past the roots of our present life and institutions.

From the past we can gain inspiration and guidance. We inherit the wealth of the ages. One philosopher has said: "Long memories make good peoples." Only by a knowledge of the past can we understand the present or wisely plan the future.

A war hero returning home will place in his safety box his citations for distinguished service, his records of achievements, his medals of honor. Your Society is the official guardian of the records of achievement of a great state, the custodian of the reputation of a commonwealth. History is written from records, and if the record of Nebraska is not preserved, Nebraska will not live in history.

If you want the history of the United States to include a fair and proper recital of Nebraska's contribution to the nation, it is essential that you preserve the necessary records and write the story. No one else is so interested in you as yourself.

And history is not dead. It is a live and vital science. New facts are constantly being found and these make new interpretations necessary. Historical research must go forward; we must

* This paper constituted the main address of the October 13 annual dinner of the State Historical Society and the Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska. Dr. Hafen introduced his address by an informal talk in a lighter vein. He discussed early relations between Nebraska and Colorado as revealed in the territorial press of Nebraska. The author's informal entertaining remarks are not included in the written paper which is here printed.

ever seek to correct errors of fact or of judgment in historical writing and make the story just and true.

As I see the work of a state historical society, it falls into three categories: first, the collection of historical material; second, its preservation, classification and indexing; and third, the dissemination of historical information.

Fundamental, of course, is the collection of material. Here we have two types, the written sources that constitute the library and archives; and, second, physical objects which comprise museum material. Of the written sources, one of the most important for our regions which have been settled in comparatively recent times is the newspaper. The newspaper is the community diary. As a contemporary record it not only gives an account of events, but it preserves the flavor and the color of a period. One gets the songs, the slang, the jokes, and the interests that are current at a given time. The advertisements are fully as instructive as the news stories. They list goods on the market, the prices, and reveal tastes and styles of the period.

Diaries, letters and reminiscences are another valuable historical source. Here again one gets the intimate details, the human interest aspects of events. Some such papers come to state historical societies as free gifts; others have to be ferretted out from attics and basements and retrieved from trash piles.

In our newer states, such as Nebraska and Colorado, pioneers are still living who made first settlements in certain sections or founded important industries and institutions. If their stories are to be obtained, historical societies must interview these people, draw out their stories and put them on paper. Otherwise, much of historical value will be permanently lost. Take, for example, the irrigation development in your marvelous North Platte Valley. There must be important pioneers in the Scottsbluff region whose information is vital to Nebraska history but who will never write down these stories of their own volition. In some cases children or grandchildren or local historians may be induced to gather these stories, but officers of the State Historical Society have an obligation to the state to see to it that this information be not lost through neglect.

Another type of historical material to be gathered consists of the reports, year books and publications of churches, clubs and

professional, labor, and industrial organizations. The centennial and semi-centennial publications of churches, colleges and commercial companies contain important information assembled for anniversary celebrations, and this material is to be had for the taking. Statements, reports and other publications of banking institutions, railroads, cattle companies and similar organizations become the source material for the industrial history that so frequently is neglected in telling the story of a state. Photographs, maps and paintings are pictorial records of the highest significance. We cherish the work of our pioneer photographers--the interesting and quaint portrayals of our early buildings, street scenes, social gatherings, picnics, early railroad trains, cattle roundups and the like. One can frequently learn as much from a single photograph, and more accurately, than one would gather from several pages of written description.

The gathering of books, documents and pamphlets, in the founding of a library, is accepted as a fundamental and primary step. Our libraries are ordinarily taking care of the work, but they must be ever watchful for the rare and fugitive piece that so frequently escapes the seeker. Especially is this true of ephemeral material such as handbills, programs, posters and promotional literature. The publications of extreme labor groups, and of radical religious, political and social organizations are too frequently taken as the mouthings of the lunatic fringe and neglected. Frequently, some of these expressions at a later day are found to have important significance.

The second type of historical material, the collection of which concerns us, includes the physical objects that should be preserved in a historical museum. First, chronologically, are the artifacts that come from the forgotten peoples of pre-historic times. The discovery of the first Folsom point in 1926, and subsequent discoveries of these unique stone pieces, and another type known as Yuma points, have pushed back by many years the date of human occupation of our western continent. The Folsom arrow point embedded in the vertebra of a pre-historic bison gave the scientists and archeologists something to think about. No actual bones of these early men have yet been found, but their stone and bone tools and implements give some indication of their manner of life.

The Indian peoples who inhabited our land before the coming of Europeans have a rich and colorful history. Their life in a stone age culture is intriguing. Their stone and bone tools found on the plains and in the caves of the mountains reveal something of the history of these interesting people before the horse, iron and firearms came to drastically modify their manner of life. Their artifacts and handiwork make not only colorful museum pieces, but revealing bits of physical history. The handsome bead work and other products of your Pawnees and Sioux are most attractive for museum display.

Pioneer relics are equally revealing. Early kitchen utensils, farm machinery, primitive vehicles are eloquent in their story of pioneer hardships and difficulties. Pioneer wearing apparel is an exhibit both of materials and of styles. Many features of the social life of a period are revealed in the costume and frills of the day.

Examples of commercial and industrial products should find a place. The type of brick, of pottery, and textiles, the various products of manufacture, examples of machines and the tools used in manufacturing, farm implements, blacksmith tools, barber shop and drug store paraphernalia become very interesting after a lapse of years.

Most of the pioneer relics and museum pieces represent the general story of the common people, but there is occasionally an individual whose contribution is so important, or whose life is so significant that he merits a place of his own. Most of the states do not have a Washington or a Lincoln, but we do have lesser lights, some of whom merit a collection of personal memorabilia. Perhaps the silver-tongued orator of the Platte or certain other Nebraska lights may be bright enough to merit the making of a collection of minor items whose importance stems from connection with this individual. The display of museum materials we shall speak of presently, but now let us take up the second phase of historical society work--the preservation of historical materials.

In the first place, proper housing is essential. Precious records should be placed in vaults where temperature and humidity are properly controlled. We nowadays have a serious problem in preserving the paper of records. The good rag paper of many

years ago has been replaced in almost all cases, and the wood pulp papers of our newsprint is very short-lived. In our own institution, we find that our newspapers of the 1860's are much better preserved than those of fifty years later. The solution in regard to much of the sulphide paper is undoubtedly microfilming. The paper itself cannot be preserved, but we can preserve the record by photographing the pages on microfilm. This not only puts the record in much more permanent form, but it is also the solution of another pressing problem--that of storage space. The microfilm copy of a newspaper volume occupies but two per cent of the space used in preserving the original; so microfilming is the answer to our bulging vaults. In Colorado, we have launched a microfilming project. With two large Recordak machines we are microfilming our newspapers, and also, through our state archives division, are microfilming essential state records of the various departments of state government.

Along with the preservation of printed materials in the historical library, the proper classification and indexing is, of course, essential. The cataloging of books and manuscripts has long since been worked into a science and is ordinarily being taken care of, but beyond that, much should be done if the vast store of historical material in our libraries is to be made accessible for utilization. Several years ago, a number of institutions were able to utilize W.P.A. labor and perform a great service in classifying and indexing historical material. Our system in Colorado was to use 4 x 6 cards, and upon these we put the historical data as it was gleaned from early newspapers, documents, diaries, etc. These cards were then filed under topical headings, and a wealth of material was made available. Thus our card file on mining, the cattle industry, railroads and similar topics was properly assembled. A biographical file brought together biographical data to which we can quickly turn for data on any pioneer or prominent person of the state. Similar files of historical data on towns, schools, churches, industries, etc., are also available. Material on the origin of place names, the names of rivers, mountains, etc., was similarly assembled.

The preservation of museum items is perhaps a lesser problem than the preserving of written records. Prehistoric artifacts, certain products and tools give us little concern, but the preser-

vation of dresses, fans, shoes and similar pieces requires special treatment. The fight against moths, vermin and other destructive agents must be constantly waged. Techniques for repair and restoration of specimens are being developed by the larger and more progressive museums.

After outlining some of the essentials in the first two categories--the collection and the preservation of historical materials--we come to the third feature, for collection and preservation have little value if the product saved is not utilized. The primary purpose of these first two activities is to enable us to effectively prosecute the third, the dissemination of historical information. Our historical societies are primarily educational institutions. There are a number of agencies by which the process can be carried forward. Most of our societies are employing one of these agencies--the publication of a historical magazine. We and other societies read with interest and profit your *Nebraska History*. Especially are you doing an outstanding job in preserving history now currently being made. In this work you have taken a position of leadership. A magazine, to serve its purpose, must be read, and to insure being read it must be interesting. Therefore, a variety of material would suggest itself for inclusion. What appeals to one person does not to another. The scholar may prefer ponderous articles of a monographic nature, but amateurs and the laymen like the human interest stories of their own people and kind, and those stories have a decided place in a historical magazine as I see it. Interviews with pioneers frequently have important and interesting details and human interest material that is generally omitted from the more ponderous tomes.

Lectures are a common but effective vehicle for presenting the history of a state or region. Schools, societies, luncheon clubs and women's clubs afford opportunities for selling the history of the state to our citizens.

Our society just now is launching a new venture by preparing a 16mm colored movie portraying the highlights of our state's history. It is a combination of travelogue, historical stories and sites, and museum exhibits. A running lecture will be made into a sound track to accompany the picture. We think it is going to be a very effective medium of telling the story of our state. If it turns out as well as we hope, one of the lead-

ing railroads wants to send out duplicates to various parts of the country.

The placing of historical markers is another activity that most of our historical societies have engaged in. These attract considerable popular interest. If they have effective legends, are well placed and are provided with drive-outs beside the highways, they carry a message to thousands of travelers.

Historical maps can be effectively used, either as a separate publication devoted specifically to historical points of interest, or a similar objective can be achieved by inducing gas companies to include historic locations on their travel maps.

The radio offers a great opportunity for the dissemination of historical information. It is a feature that requires much time to make the presentation effective, but if done with skill and accuracy, it can be one of the greatest agencies for historical work.

News letters to the press reach a large audience. If these news releases are of uniform size and caliber and can be regularly used in a given place, readers will look for and read them.

I note that you have historical essay contests. If well conducted and directed, these can bring much new material to light. The publication of monographs, collections, and special studies is a decided contribution in the historical field.

If a Society is to be progressive and fill its true mission, it must engage in historical research work. New information and new interpretations are ever found by the scholar who studiously pursues the sources. The historical society has an obligation to present the story accurately. Not only must its own work and publications be authentic, but it should be vigilant to correct errors and misstatements that are constantly being made by well-meaning but misinformed persons. An untrue statement once romantically launched as a fact is most difficult to correct.

A second method of disseminating historical information and engendering historical appreciation is through skillfully planned and executed museum displays. The major museum display should be the arrangement of a logical sequence to tell the story of the state. For this purpose we have found dioramas to be the most effective. Ours are miniature models for the most part in which the human figures are about five inches high and

everything else is in proportion. These miniature models enable us to present within the compass of an ordinary-sized case a whole Indian village or a section of a city. Our figures are made with a beeswax and balsam mixture that we have found much more satisfactory than clay or plaster. The figures are pliable, and with a hot tool, features can be easily changed and positions varied to make a most effective set.

Museums recently have been coming into their own as truly educational institutions. No longer are they conglomerations of freaks and oddities. The objects can be arranged to tell a story, and appear as examples illustrating the legends. It does not take long for a museum to become overcrowded, and there is no justification for many examples of the same subject; hence, more and more materials must be taken from the exhibit cases, and placed in study collections. Such collections, when properly arranged, serve a very useful educational purpose, and the exhibit cases are thus freed for artistic and well chosen displays.

The progressive historical society soon outgrows its home in the State Capital, and can very properly take on the control and management of house museums at strategic places throughout the state. Old missions, forts and historic houses may frequently be converted into local museums of real distinction. The parent museum should prepare traveling exhibits suitable for sending to schools and to local museums. I remember some years ago a very effective piece of this type of work in your state. Two railroad cars were filled with museum materials and sent over the Burlington railroad. To reach northwestern Nebraska these cars were routed through a section of Colorado, and at our town of Brush I visited the Nebraska Historical Society display.

Now these three phases of historical society work about which I have spoken are all important. The collection of material, proper preservation and the dissemination of information gathered therefrom; but you know and I know that historical work must be financed, and to obtain the required money our work must be sold to the people of the state. Perhaps the first and most logical source of revenue is through legislative appropriations. If this historical work should be done, and the people want it done, adequate legislative support is justifiable and desirable. The legislators have many calls for money on one hand, and demands for economy and tax reduction on the other, so these typ-

ical citizens of the state must be educated as to historical needs. A historical program must be sold to them. In the first place, they should receive the reports and publications of the Society. We have found it very effective in Colorado to invite the legislators to the State Museum for a complimentary buffet supper, and under these favorable circumstances show them our collections and present our needs. We have found legislators, as a general rule, to be greatly interested in history. One of the reasons many of them are in the Legislature is to make a name for themselves and win a place in the history of the state. We ask them for biographical data about themselves and their families, and for photographs to file with this biographical data in our historical library. As public men of the state, these legislators add valuable materials to the historical collections.

If the Board of Directors of the Historical Society is made up of outstanding and influential citizens who have a real interest in the history of the state, they can be very effective in securing public support. As men of standing who are devoting themselves to the historical cause at a sacrifice of their own time and money, their real interest in historical matters is demonstrated, and their influence is felt.

Our historical societies are usually financed, in part at least, through memberships. Where a historical magazine is published, subscription to this journal is usually the most appealing feature of membership. From that standpoint, improvement of the magazine is a method of increasing membership, but there are always those who are willing to make a larger contribution, and so sustaining and patron memberships give opportunity for those who wish to give real financial support to be recognized as patrons of historical work. A membership drive before Christmas time can have very good results, as there are those who can be induced to give memberships as gifts. An appeal to present members to suggest names of likely candidates for membership is a helpful device.

Large gifts and bequests for the society's work in general or for the prosecution of a particular type of activity are not to be neglected. Our Society received a gift in the form of a foundation for the marking of historic sites. The income only is used toward the purchase of bronze plaques for historical markers. Funds for similar projects may be solicited. If the Bar Association or

lawyers dealing with estates can be made history conscious, they can do a great service to historical work by suggesting bequests for such purposes. Smaller gifts--books, collections of manuscripts and papers, and relics and objects of museum value--are to be encouraged. By listing such donations in the historical magazine, the gift suggestion is automatically made to other persons having similar items to present.

News stories that feature gifts to the society, when given a play in the press, are very effective. Appropriate and favorable publicity is to be sought. The newspapers and the radio are important agencies, of course. The appointment of regional vice-presidents to represent sections of the state is helpful. Historical treks to different parts of the state, with the holding of meetings, the dedication of historical markers, and similar activities, publicize the society's work, win friends, and demonstrate the society's achievements.

We of the West have a precious heritage from our pioneers. In United States history the frontier is acknowledged as perhaps the most persistent and influential factor in shaping our national life. The frontier left its impress. It engendered self-reliance, it brought opportunity, it demanded courage, it promoted democracy, it insisted on cooperation, it developed faith and idealism. Theodore Roosevelt wrote in his *Winning of the West*: "A single generation passed under the hard conditions of life in the wilderness was enough to weld together into one people the representatives of these numerous and widely different races; . . . Their iron surroundings made a mold" which shaped their lives.

Now that usable free land is gone, the frontier shifts from the realm of geography to that of social and intellectual accomplishment, but here is a field of such vast proportions that no one has discerned its far border. Frontiers of knowledge and achievement, limitless and unforseen, beckon every citizen of the state to test the blood in his veins to prove if he be a true son of pioneers. We may still feel the urges that prompted Kipling's Explorer:

"Something hidden, go and find it;
Go and look behind the ranges,
Something lost behind the ranges,
Lost and waiting for you. Go!"