



## The Sources of Nebraska History

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Article Summary: White enumerates the documents upon which written history must be based: diaries and reminiscences, newspapers, records of organizations, and official reports.

## THE SOURCES OF NEBRASKA HISTORY

BY JOHN B. WHITE

**P**ERHAPS it is appropriate that a person named White should be giving a talk on what is often thought of as the dull and colorless subject of bibliography. But bibliography is basic. It may be dull, though it has its moments of excitement, as when one encounters a copy of a rare overland journal in a gift collection, or a body of material which apparently has not been exploited by the historian. I like it, or I would not be doing this kind of work.

It is the task of the bibliographer in relation to the historian to locate and to identify the sources from which history is written. Insofar as the historian himself performs these tasks, he is acting as his own bibliographer. It is the bibliographer's task, further, to assist the historian in his task of evaluating these sources. The job of the library is to acquire, preserve, and record these materials, rendering them accessible through indexes and catalogs and by arrangement in some systematic manner.

I am sure it is unnecessary with such an audience as this to labor the subject of the importance of sources. Without them history—adequate, reliable, truthful history—cannot be written. The sources are the only media we have of contact with the past.

*Dr. John B. White is librarian of the Nebraska State Historical Society. This paper is based on an outline of remarks made at the afternoon session of the 75th anniversary meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, 26 September 1953.*

If it is difficult to reconstruct past events, it is even more difficult to appreciate the different atmosphere in which those events took place. Reflect back in your own experience on the temper of America during the past year. Then reflect back on the temper of America as you recall it twenty years ago, under the conditions to which Dr. Sellers has referred. How difficult it is to recapture the mood of that recent time through which you and I lived. How much more difficult it is, then, to reconstruct, if I may use that expression, the atmosphere or temper of times which we have not personally experienced. It can be done only through the use of ample sources.

Recently I have been engaged in a survey of the published source materials for Nebraska territorial history. I should like to take the subject as announced in the program as a point of departure and to discuss with you, who are interested in Nebraska history, some of the observations that occurred to me while making that survey. There is nothing new and remarkable about them, but it seems to me they point to some things that we can be doing to strengthen our collection of the sources from which Nebraska history is to be written.

One of the first things to be noted about these published source materials is the preponderance of reminiscences. Now historians do not scorn reminiscences. The recognition of their limited value is only the sensible mean between the two false extremes of worthlessness and infallibility. I am quite sure that it would be impossible to write an adequate history of Nebraska Territory without their use. The Nebraska Territorial Pioneers Association some years ago published two small volumes of reminiscences, in 1917 and 1923. The Historical Society has some extra copies of these volumes, available free upon request so long as the supply lasts. No doubt you are all familiar with Andreas' *History of the State of Nebraska*, published in Chicago in 1882 by the Western Historical Company, a ponderous volume of some 1,500 pages, once found in many Nebraska homes and often used as a means of elevating the younger members of the family at the dinner table. Andreas

contains a large proportion of reminiscences, material gathered directly from the numerous subjects of biographical sketches or their families and dependent on their recollection.

The commercially sponsored county histories are also well-known. One type contained stereotyped biographies of Presidents and Governors, with the same plates used again and again for different counties, changing only the section of local biographies. In another type, somewhat superior, the co-operation of leading citizens of a community was secured, and usually some local records were printed, though often with little discrimination. They are largely reminiscences.

The point for us to note is that this material was somehow collected, on a more or less systematic basis, and that it was preserved. It is my hope that more can be done toward preserving the recollections of those who have made Nebraska history, though for the territorial period it is now too late. Let us note also that anyone can collect them. I am thinking now of a Keyapaha County schoolteacher who had her students interview old settlers in the community for publication in a small booklet. Our archivist, Mr. Danker, recently tape-recorded some interviews with old settlers at Crete.

But when everything has been said that can be said in defense of reminiscences as a historical source, the fact remains that they are not nearly so valuable as the sources of immediate record. I mean by that the contemporary records—the newspapers, the leaflets, the pamphlets, the broadsides, produced at or near the time of the events they describe, before they were colored by the memory to appear as people wish they had been, rather than as they really were. The late Douglas McMurtrie, who did such splendid work in the history of printing in America, declared that all of his experience had highlighted the inestimable value of immediacy of record.

What is the story for Nebraska history so far as this type of published source is concerned? It is not nearly as good as we would like. The American Imprints Inventory,

in its inventory of Nebraska non-documentary imprints, with full bibliographic descriptions, averaging four items to a page, covers only thirty pages. This gives us only a vague idea of the vast amount of material that must have existed at one time, most of which has now vanished. The territorial legislature charged the territorial librarian with the duty of collecting one issue of each newspaper published in the territory for preservation. Unfortunately this duty was not performed. There were a number of reasons—frequent turnover in the office of librarian, inadequate support, lack of facilities. The territorial newspapers which now comprise one of our most treasured collections were preserved by historically minded individuals.

This heavy mortality of the sources of immediate record is not unique with Nebraska. It is true throughout the country and is a real handicap to historical scholarship. It is the library's responsibility to collect these publications. In this task your co-operation is essential. The editors of Nebraska have been most generous, and for their generosity we are grateful.

These publications, it is important to observe, must be secured when they are new, or they are not likely to be secured at all. Did you ever try to locate a copy of a last month's newspaper? Their arrival at the Historical Society when new is to be preferred. If they are saved by some interested person and eventually find their way into the Society's collections, the same result is achieved, though less surely.

I have been talking in terms of published sources. But I should like us to think also in terms of unpublished sources—diaries, journals, letters, records, addresses, pictures, and similar materials. A part of our Information Index routine consists of the systematic perusal of a daily newspaper of statewide coverage. Whenever an obituary is noted of an individual who was outstanding in his state or community or profession, a letter, prepared in the library, is sent over the signature of the superintendent to the next of kin, suggesting that a fitting memorial to the individual's life and work would be to place his papers in the Historical

Society. The response to these letters has been very gratifying. Many of the recipients have expressed themselves as being grateful for the suggestion. But the initiative need not come from us.

May I mention two points concerning which questions are sometimes raised in this connection. Sometimes people find it difficult to understand why we care about these things. They wonder what historical value they can possibly have. It is not always easy to answer such questions. I try to point out that such materials, even of relatively obscure individuals, often help to give us the flavor of their time. Or it may be said that history is like a structure made of brick or stone or wood, in which the minute facts are analogous, not to the bricks or the boards, but rather to the molecules of which they are composed. It may be difficult to see the relationship between one small, isolated fact and the entire structure of history, but the facts are essential.

The second point is the misgiving some persons have lest private family papers be exposed to the gaze of the idly curious, or lest remarks concerning personalities be used in such a way as to cause hurt feelings or reputations. Such misgivings are understandable, but I believe there is little basis for them. Personal papers are not displayed for the general public to see except in cases of extraordinary historic interest. They are kept in boxes in the library stacks. The Historical Society feels responsible for the responsible use of the materials which are in its custody. The capable historian can often obtain information of considerable historical value from a collection of personal papers without touching on the more delicate personal aspects. Sometimes, by agreement with the donors, a collection of papers placed with the Society is made subject to certain restrictions for a period of years.

Besides the papers of individuals, the minutes and records of organizations should be preserved—business organizations, labor organizations, farm groups, churches, and many others, to say nothing of government agencies. While an organization is active, it usually needs its records for current use, but what happens to the records of an

organization when it becomes defunct? Well, the last secretary may keep them as mementos, or they may be thrown out as junk. The Historical Society welcomes such records.

There are even some things, it seems to me, that we can do to create the sources for Nebraska history or to improve on those now being made. It would be desirable to record legislative hearings and discussions. Our legislative journal, valuable as it is as a source of information, is primarily a record of business transacted. Each of us is a member of one or more organizations. We can do our part to see that its records are properly made and preserved.

Two other observations should be made concerning the sources of Nebraska territorial history. One is the importance of government-sponsored fact-gathering. The official reports which were required by law of the various government agencies are indispensable—the War Department, the Office of Indian Affairs, the General Land Office, the great explorations made under government auspices, well illustrate the point. These reports were required because it was the policy of our nation that this information be made available to our citizens. This, it should be noted, is a social principle of tremendous significance. The reports were printed because the government paid the printer, a practical matter of no little importance.

In another way we are dependent on government-sponsored fact-gathering. The establishment and maintenance of an institution by the people of the state of Nebraska is a recognition of the importance of this function. Without minimizing the hazards of a tax-supported institution, it will be recognized that the collection and preservation of historical materials can be done in a somewhat more systematic manner than if left to the unsupported efforts of individuals. Though the element of chance remains large, this important function can be performed with greater continuity and sustained attention.

The other observation, which should be mentioned in the same breath as the one I have been discussing, is the role of the interested individual in the collection and

preservation of our source materials. I should like to pay my humble tribute to those pioneers of our Society, particularly Robert W. Furnas, whose historical interest and sense of responsibility preserved for us some of the largest and finest collections which we treasure today. The cooperation of interested individuals is indispensable if we are to succeed in providing the ample sources necessary for the writing of Nebraska history.

And so I think we have a formula. We have an institution established and maintained by the people of the state of Nebraska for this purpose. We know the importance of the role of the interested individuals who love history and who love Nebraska. We realize the necessity of cooperation in our endeavors. There is an awareness of the necessity of saving publications when they are new, of recording the reminiscences of the yet living, before it is too late, of the importance of preserving the papers of outstanding individuals and the minutes and records of organizations, even of creating the necessary records. While this formula may not have the world-shaking importance of  $E = MC^2$ , I believe it will help to build significantly our collection of the source materials for that more adequate, more nearly complete, more accurate and truthful history of Nebraska, which is our goal.