



The Nebraska State Historical Society in 1959

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Louis A. Holmes, Newly Elected President, Nebraska State
Historical Society

THE NEBRASKA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY IN 1959

BY W. D. AESCHBACHER

A NUMBER of years ago Dr. Walter P. Webb, in his Presidential address to the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, likened historical activity to rabbits digging holes. He commented that if industry and enthusiasm were exhibited, the observer could see little mounds appearing all over the prairie.

Dr. Webb was speaking primarily about historical research by his graduate students, but historical activity, industry and enthusiasm on the part of individuals, local societies and other groups has created a great number of mounds and made great changes in the aspect of our Nebraska historical prairie in the past three years. These evidences of industry and enthusiasm and the resulting development are encouraging and inspiring to those charged with dealing with historical affairs in the state.

Dr. W. D. Aeschbacher is Director of the Nebraska State Historical Society. This report was presented in part at the 81st annual meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society at Lincoln, September 26, 1959.

Such industry and enthusiasm is exhibited by a great number of people. Giving amounts of time and talent to the affairs of the Society, far beyond the normal call of duty during the past two years, has been the Society's President, James L. Sellers. The names of dozens of persons who have worked hard and long on projects not directly connected with the Society program come easily to mind. The members of the Society's Executive Board have given serious attention to affairs of the Society in a period when decisions of a far-reaching nature have been under consideration. The Society staff has cheerfully and efficiently dealt with the needs of the most demanding year we have experienced in my tenure as Director.

New historical societies continue to spring up, and those that are in operation continue to flourish. The activities of several during the year have been marked with splendid success. During the summer I was privileged to attend ground-breaking ceremonies for two buildings to house county historical society museums, one in Cherry and one in Cass county. A number of historical museums exist in the state, having taken advantage of building space more or less readily available, but, to my knowledge, before this year the desire and interest in a museum has not been so intense as to provide for the building of a new, fireproof structure primarily for that purpose in any community in Nebraska.

The re-awakened interest in Fort Kearny State Park has caused petitions to be circulated asking the Governor to name a Fort Kearny Maintenance, Restoration, and Development Board. Similar action is under consideration at Fort Atkinson. The enthusiasm for local historical projects is most heartening, as is the continuing interest in and enthusiasm for local anniversary celebrations and the expressions of interest in state-wide celebrations such as the Bryan Centennial and the Pony Express Centennial, both scheduled for 1960 and the Norris Centennial in 1961. These are in keeping with the rising interest in the celebration of Nebraska's one hundredth birthday in 1967.

The increasing interest in things historical and the reputation and abilities of the Society have involved us during the past twelve months in a number of additional activities completed, in process, and contemplated in the immediate future. A major one of these is work at Fort Atkinson. Senators Hruska and Curtis have worked for federal recognition of the post for the past several years, and through their help a federal appropriation of \$5,000 to be matched by Society funds is now available for archeological work.

The understanding and co-operation of the State Highway Department during the last session of the legislature assisted in obtaining legislation that will enable us to carry on archeological salvage work much more effectively in sites that will be destroyed by road construction.

Besides the prospective Fort Atkinson and highway salvage activity in archeology, the State Game, Forestation and Parks Commission has indicated a keen interest in having the Society carry on archeological work in another area in the 1960 season. They have asked our help in developing a plan for the historical interpretation of Fort Kearny State Park. This will call for archeological work, in addition to a restudy of the documents available on the Fort. To complete the study necessary for a historical interpretation program will take the full time of at least one member of our professional staff for several months.

During the past summer the reputation and abilities of our Museum and its staff involved us in another type of project which occupied the attention of Miss Sally Johnson for several months. The National Park Service requested us to make a study of the Maltese Cross Ranch Cabin, which it is reconstructing in the Theodore Roosevelt National Park. Miss Johnson's study involved the appearance of the cabin at the time it was used by Roosevelt, both internal and external, and the furnishings available to reconstruct it. This study is now completed. In this venture the National Park Service compensated the Society for our ex-

penses in the project, and we will receive financial assistance at Fort Atkinson, Fort Kearny, and in highway salvage work.

Other additional activities have been accepted because of the need for them and the nature of the operations concerned. The scope of our microfilming project has been altered to a degree by changing concepts throughout the nation, requests for assistance within the state, and a continuing need to conserve our library storage areas. Additions to our original program started with the filming of the *Nebraska Farmer* with a subsidy from the publisher. This was reported two years ago. In the past year we have reached agreements to film the *Lincoln Journal* and *The Lincoln Star* and the *Kearney Hub*, with their publishers assisting materially in meeting the Society's expense in the project. We have also made arrangements to film the *Omaha Bee* with the Omaha Public Library helping us bear the cost of this project. These projects will give us microfilm files of papers now occupying substantial storage space, and at a cost considerably less than that of any microfilm we have acquired to date. At the same time they will make microfilm copies of the papers available for the publishers and the Omaha Public Library respectively at a saving to them.

In the legislature two acts were passed that the Society sponsored. One was the bill providing a means for highway department assistance to be rendered to the Society in carrying on archeological work in certain cases. This has already been mentioned. A second bill amended the legislation of two years ago establishing a Historical Markers Committee to make the operation of this function the responsibility of an appointed council. The legislature also made a modest appropriation for this project so that some activity in this field may be expected.

Another legislative act of interest to history lovers and to the Society was L. B. 408, dealing with the Game, Forestation and Parks Commission. The act defines a number

of kinds of parks including historical parks, and it provided for the Commission to seek advice and assistance in historical park activities from the State Historical Society.

Our membership has climbed to 2,637, almost 100 higher than the previous high figure reached in 1958, with 241 new members gained during the year.

Late in 1958 we received the most substantial single monetary gift ever given the Society, a gift of \$10,000 from Mr. Sterling Morton in memory of his grandfathers, J. Sterling Morton and George B. Lake. A number of times during the Society's existence efforts to make its members and others interested in its aims aware of their responsibility and opportunity to support it financially have been made, as in the establishment of the Nebraska State Historical Society Foundation in 1942. An increased awareness of this responsibility and opportunity on the part of the people interested will lead to additional financial contributions in the future, as well as more careful provision for the deposit of historically important papers and objects with the Society.

Members of the Society staff made sixty-eight talks to groups outside of the building in the interests of Nebraska's history. The Society has continued to bring the state's history to a television audience. Our aim last year was to produce a few shows of permanent value to be filmed and made available to all television stations in the state. This program has been held up by a series of television production problems of a technical nature, and no programs were actually filmed although some were produced on KUON, the University of Nebraska's educational station. We have received assurances that we will be able to make programs produced this year available for projection.

The Society staff has maintained its connections with and responsibilities towards the professional state, regional and national organizations with which it is affiliated. Members of the staff represented the Society at the American Historical Association, Mississippi Valley Historical

Association and American Association for State and Local History Meetings, the Mountain Plains Archeological Conference, and the Mountain Plains Library Conference. A workshop for Nebraska Museums was jointly sponsored with the University of Nebraska State Museum and the University of Nebraska Art Galleries. An article, "Problems, Goals, Progress, 1958" by Dr. White was published in the *Mountain Plains Library Quarterly*. Mr. Kivett presented a paper at the Plains Archeological Conference and Miss Johnson participated in the program at the Mountain Plains Museum Conference. Dr. White served as President of the Nebraska Library Association. Among my additional activities are Secretary-Treasurer of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, member of the Board of Directors of the Harry S. Truman Library Institute and of the Civil War Centennial Advisory Commission and the Pony Express Centennial Association.

Our publications program, producing *Nebraska History*, now in its fortieth volume, our *News Letter*, now in its twelfth year, and a weekly column "Out of Old Nebraska" for the state newspapers was not altered during the year. In relation to the magazine I would call your attention to the fact that it was made available in bound form for the first time with Volume 39, the 1958 magazines. A program of meeting obvious needs for readily available materials on certain subjects, begun with the publication of the Frank North journal in the June 1958 issue of *Nebraska History*, was continued. The September 1958 issue was devoted primarily to Roger Grange's history of Fort Robinson and the March 1959 issue to Miss Johnson's and Mr. Kivett's accounts of Fort Atkinson. Similar issues in the future will strengthen the material available on important topics relative to our state's history.

Through the year the three departments of the Society, under the direction of Mr. Kivett, Dr. White and Mrs. Winkelman, made outstanding progress. More detailed reports on the activity of each follow:

THE MUSEUM

A variety of activities characterize the museum program. They may be described under the general headings of preservation, interpretation and research. Considerable progress was made during the past year in all three phases of activity. A total of 192 individual collections were accepted containing 1,456 separate items. Among these collections was furniture from the dining room of the John B. Wright home in Lincoln, representing the early 1900 period. A period room setting is now under construction to exhibit this collection. Other donations added to the overall story of people in this area.

It should be noted that many offers of donations could not be accepted during the year. In some cases materials of a similar nature were already adequately represented in the collections, or the materials were not related to the Nebraska area. In other instances, particularly in the case of larger pieces, storage and display space were not available. During the last ten years a total of 1,319 individuals have donated 13,936 specimens to the museum and our acquisition policy must become increasingly selective. With the increase in the number of county and regional museums it becomes possible to refer more potential donors to other Nebraska museums. At the same time our need for additional storage space is critical.

In many ways the displays are the show windows of the museum. A total of forty units of displays were changed during the past year in our areas of exhibit. These areas include the Lincoln building, the Fort Robinson Museum, and our State Fair exhibit. The units varied from a single case display to a small building—the Blacksmith Shop at Fort Robinson. A single exhibit or show entitled "Centennial Album" occupied the second floor corridor of the Lincoln building during much of the year. This consisted of three period settings plus photographic murals dealing with the Lincoln Centennial.

Two life-size dioramas were constructed, a new exhibit technique for us. One deals with water transportation by Indians on the Missouri River, while the other has the theme of cowboy life in western Nebraska. New exhibit cases were constructed for the State Fair exhibits by Mr. Herbert Thomas, Museum Artist. These cases permitted the exhibition of smaller items, such as toys, glassware, hand guns, and archeological specimens. The State Fair exhibits also included four period settings dealing largely with the white pioneer period.

A highlight of the exhibit program at Fort Robinson during the year was the opening of the Post Blacksmith Shop. This marked the first extension of displays outside the Post Headquarters building which was opened in 1956. Additional interpretative wooden signs were also prepared and placed at sites of interest on the Post. The program of using such signs, begun last year, permits the visitor to identify the significant areas at the Fort.

During the year a total of 130,725 people viewed the exhibits with increases at all three areas. A total of 80,952 visited the Society building; 16,998 viewed the Fort Robinson exhibits and 32,775 were counted at the State Fair displays.

Progress has been made in the documentation and study of specimens already in our collections. A graduate student assistant has nearly completed a study of our edged weapon collection, consisting largely of American knives and swords. Progress has been made, under the direction of Miss Sally Johnson, Curator of History, toward a more adequate identification of the white pioneer collection of clothing and other related items. Research studies have continued in the archeological section. The laboratory analysis of specimens collected from excavations in the Fort Randall Reservoir of South Dakota during the 1954 and 1955 field seasons was largely completed. This project was aided by a grant from the United States National Park

Service, which also had provided funds to aid in the excavations of the site.

The Society participated with other institutions of this area in the Missouri Basin Chronology Program. This program, which seeks to date archeological sites in the Missouri River Basin area by utilizing various techniques, has obtained a number of new dates for Nebraska. One of the dates, secured by the radio carbon method from the Michigan Memorial-Phoenix Project at the University of Michigan, indicated an age of more than 6,000 years for the Logan Creek site excavated in Burt County during the 1957 season. The cultural materials from the site were new to Nebraska archeology and suggested relationships between these early Nebraskans and people to the East.

Extensive excavations carried out at the site during the 1959 field season revealed a total of four occupational zones marked by hearths or shallow pits. Only the upper three of these levels had been revealed by the 1957 excavations.

Numerous reports of damage to archeological sites were received during the past year. Reported areas were investigated in Butler, Burt, Cass, Dodge, Garden and Nance Counties. Other sites reported were not investigated because of the shortage of personnel and indications that they would not be immediately destroyed.

THE LIBRARY

A most important accomplishment in the library was catching up with the mass of material that we have accumulated over a period of years. It was necessary to accept materials without having the space to process them, or the staff to adequately catalogue them for many years, but since we have been in our present building this accumulation has been gradually reduced. Almost 1,900 books were added to our cataloged collection as we liquidated the last of

this accumulation. Additional emphasis can now be placed on the development of guides, indexes, and other tools to make the information in the library more readily accessible. It will also enable us to handle even greater numbers of gifts to the library than those from our 388 donors last year.

In the past several years the library has made much progress in making its information more accessible. Last year all of the small manuscript collections, over 1,500 in number, were entered in our card catalogue. Nearly 25,000 cards were also added to the Nebraska Information Index, compiled on the *Lincoln Star*, *Sunday Journal and Star*, and *Sunday World Herald*. Some 350 articles and items dealing with the state's history in periodicals, series, and collections, were identified in our card catalog. Work is also in progress indexing the *Nebraska State Gazetteers*, and in analyzing and filing in the card catalog, information on the J. Sterling Morton pamphlet collection.

The Library had 3,512 visitors to the reading and newspaper rooms during the year. In addition 492 mail inquiries were answered and 308 telephone queries. Four hundred thirty-six research questions, questions taking over fifteen minutes of a staff member's time, were answered, along with 735 reference questions plus the inquiries that could be handled by referring the inquirer to the source containing the information desired.

The newspaper and periodical collection continues to grow with 282 newspapers, 273 Nebraska periodicals, and 290 other periodicals being received regularly. We added to our newspaper collection with the microfilming of a number of papers loaned to us for that purpose. The largest such loan was 108 volumes of Columbus papers from the Platte County court house. A number of manuscripts on loan to the Society were also microfilmed and so added to our collections.

The picture library continues to be widely used. Publishers, periodicals, and individuals using our picture col-

lection this year include Charles Scribner's Sons, D. C. Heath and Company, Harcourt, Brace and Howe, Allyn Bacon Incorporated, *Tradition, Life, Nebraska Farmer*; the National Park Service, Robert C. Doty of the George Eastman House, and Daniel W. Jones of the National Broadcasting Company.

The increase in library holdings is shown in this table:

Category	1958	Additions	Total 1959
Volumes	36,906	3,762	40,668
Newspaper volumes ...	18,952	126	19,078
Maps	1,154	11	1,165
Microfilm reels	5,024	637	5,661
Broadsides	58	29	87
Pictures	61,866	1,530	63,396

EDUCATION DIVISION

The educational program in 1958-59 was marked by increased attendance at regularly scheduled educational activities in the Society's building. The overall educational program followed the pattern established in previous years. Tours, auditorium programs, and educational puppet shows were offered. The Lincoln Junior League again gave us valuable assistance in educational activities and Museum projects. Fourteen Junior League volunteer workers did service at the Society during 1958-59.

Increased attendance was sparked in part by the Lincoln Centennial which aroused interest in the Society's educational activities. During February, March and April, the Society offered a special centennial program which attracted eighty-four school groups comprising 2,249 children. Over 1,900 of these children attended the program during February and March, when the attendance in the Museum is normally low. The centennial program con-

sisted of the showing of the Great Plains Trilogy film, "Lincoln, the New Capital City," a short talk on the history of Lancaster County and the historical sites in the Lincoln area, and a guided tour through the special centennial exhibits in the Museum. Each child who attended the program was given a mimeographed list of the historical sites and was encouraged to visit these places with his parents.

The success of this program points to the desirability of setting up a special program each winter to co-ordinate with special museum exhibits and to attract school groups during the months when attendance is normally low and it is possible to devote adequate time and attention to each group, a constant objective in our educational program.

Increased attendance in the early spring, and during the fall months enabled us to provide a better educational experience to more children this year, although the tendency for visitation to "bunch up" in the late spring was illustrated on May 15 when almost 1,000 children visited the Society, 700 before noon.

During the year tours were given to 223 groups comprising 5,253 people. One hundred ninety-four groups, totaling 4,389 people attended auditorium programs, and 56 groups totaling 1,595 children attended puppet shows.

A new community service was rendered by the establishment of a costume-loan service in the Education Division. This costume collection was set up to provide costumes for the Society's TV productions and to supply numerous requests for period costumes from outside organizations. Costumes in our permanent Museum collections cannot be worn or loaned out. The costume-loan collection was therefore set up as a separate collection and is made up of reproductions, duplicates, and remodeled garments which are not considered suitable for the Society's permanent collections. These costumes can be used on TV and loaned to organizations for use in educational programs.

Numerous Lincoln groups made use of these costumes during the Lincoln Centennial.

The Division answered a number of letters asking for specific information and distributed over 11,500 educational leaflets and brochures to teachers in Nebraska and throughout the United States. Other duties of the Division include primary responsibilities for the television productions of the Society, and much of the editing of Society publications. The preparation of Society brochures falls in this department also, and a new membership brochure, museum brochures for both the Lincoln and Fort Robinson Museums, and an educational brochure were prepared during the year.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Mark Twain once said, "Sometimes you have to run as fast as you can to keep from falling behind." In many ways this has been the situation of the Society through the year just passed. In almost every area we have felt it necessary to become involved in additional activities that seriously threaten permanently planned programs.

A number of these additional programs were referred to in the early part of this report. A major disappointment was the decision of the state government not to grant funds for additions to our staff in critically needed areas. Many areas of expanded activity in which we are working or plan to work call for other agencies to bear part or all of the expense. However, such activity has been of such intermittent character, that it has not allowed us to use the income for permanent staff additions. In several areas accepting new and badly needed responsibilities has curtailed our work from lack of sufficient personnel with the requisite professional training. One action has been taken to strengthen the Society's enlarged program. The transfer of Mr. Roger Grange from Curator of the Fort Robinson Museum to Assistant Museum Director will increase the

flexibility and efficiency of our staff and will make more available a competent and experienced archeologist to help meet the demands for archeological survey which we are increasingly experiencing. Needs for additional help in museum display, in the educational program, in publications and in field service over the state are still not resolved.

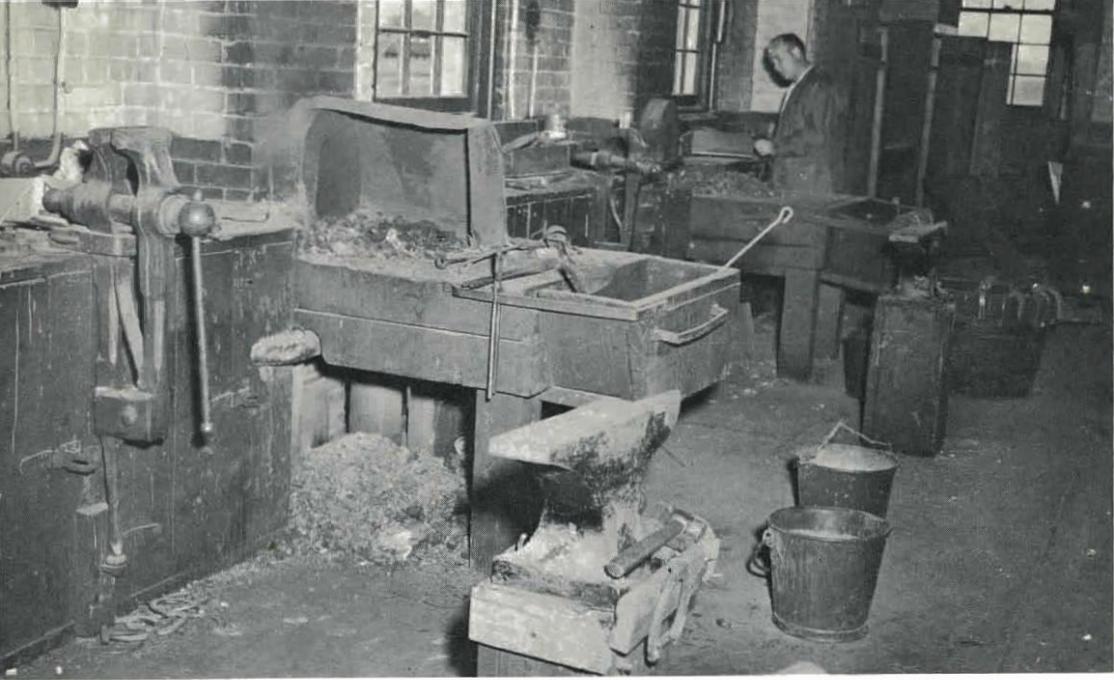
The Society knew that increased functions and responsibilities were inevitable when it occupied its new quarters in 1953 and it made a constructive effort to meet this need from 1950-1954. In the intervening years the functions and responsibilities have developed as anticipated, but the additional staff to meet these responsibilities has not been made available. The energies of the Society in the next few years must be turned more directly to the problems of gaining increased financial support and recruiting competent personnel to meet the demands currently being made on the Society.



Above—Television, 1959.
A newly-arrived family discovers that their beautiful Nebraska townsite is nothing but a cornfield.

Below—Library staff members examine important acquisitions.





Above—Blacksmith's Shop, New Addition to Fort Robinson
Museum Exhibits

Below—Society's archeological field party excavates pre-
historic village site in Burt County, dating back more than
6,000 years.

