Collecting Policies of the Minnesota Historical Society: 1849-1952

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Minnesota Historical Society

FOR those who have followed the progress of the Minnesota Historical Society in collecting manuscripts, a trip through the storage vault is a pleasant reminder of what has been accomplished. Boxes and volumes, row after row, hold fragments of the story of Minnesota, a region that grew from a wilderness into a modern state in a hundred years. Here and there on the shelves are the manuscripts that form the keystone of the collection — papers of business, labor, political parties, churches and cultural organizations; papers of individuals like Ignatius Donnelly, Henry Hastings Sibley, Lawrence Taliaferro, Frank B. Kellogg, and Alexander Ramsey. This collection resulted from the foresight and energy of people charged with the collecting responsibility; from material resources provided by the State of Minnesota and private citizens; and from the generosity of approximately 4,000 people who have given manuscripts to the society.

Minnesotans did not wait until they were in a reminiscent mood to build an institution for their historical records. In 1849, the year Minnesota became a Territory, they organized the Minnesota Historical Society. Among its members were men busy with their own work. While they were electioneering, discharging the duties of public office, conducting their businesses, preaching, educating, and building, they kept their eyes on the tiny institution that would preserve the record of what they were doing. With a fine sense of history, they gathered information about what had happened in the Minnesota country before they had arrived; they kept the manuscripts that would explain their present; and they provided for the future by fostering an institution that would last through the lives of many men. The spirit of public responsibility demonstrated by distinguished Minnesotans is a tradition that is continually enriching the historical resources of the State.

In its statement of objectives, the society was rather expansive about what it intended to collect: ". . . its primary object," reads the charter adopted in 1849, "shall be the collection and preserva-

tion of a library, mineralogical and geological specimens, Indian curiosities and other matters and things connected with and calculated to illustrate and perpetuate the history and settlement of said Territory." An amendment to the charter adopted in 1868 was more specific:

> The object of this Society shall be to collect, embody, arrange, and preserve, a Library of Books, Pamphlets, Maps, Manuscripts, Prints, Papers, or Paintings; a cabinet and museum of Minerals and Archeological curiosities; and other materials illustrative of the Civil, Religious, Literary, and Natural History of the State; to rescue from oblivion the memory of its early pioneers, and to obtain and preserve narratives of their exploits, perils, and hardy adventures. . . .

The charter clearly provided for the collecting of manuscripts. The shape which collecting policies took in succeeding years was largely the result of the understanding and vigor of persons in positions of responsibility.

Even in its early years, the society collected papers extensively. When Solon J. Buck became superintendent in 1914, there were 492 groups of manuscripts in the collection. Although most of the papers were not arranged, cataloged, or publicized, they had nevertheless been saved from destruction. The Stephen H. Long journals came in 1860-61; the Lawrence Taliaferro papers in 1867-68; Abraham Lincoln and George Washington manuscripts in 1869-70; the Sibley papers in 1893; the Christopher C. Andrews papers in 1909; the Franklin Steele papers in 1913; and the Ignatius Donnelly papers in 1914. Large additions have since been made to most of the papers, but it is significant that important acquisitions were made before the society began its greatest collecting activity.

The "exploits, perils, and hardy adventures" of the pioneers were not forgotten in the press of collecting other manuscripts. Reminiscences and autobiographies were produced in quantity. Some were read at meetings of the society and published in the *Collections*. Others were written specifically for deposit in the manuscripts collection. Although many people wrote without special urging, the secretary of the society decided in 1872 to encourage authorship by sending out a circular to pioneers. He was sensible of the responsibility for transferring the experiences of individuals into the written record. "If this material is not collected," he wrote in his annual report, "the Society cannot justly be blamed with neglect, as they have done what they could. . . ." Although many people ignored the circular, the returns added substantially to personal data on Minnesotans.

Early acquisitions demonstrated the breadth of the natural collecting area of the society. There was no precise definition in the charter of the subject matter and geographic scope included in a collection "illustrative of the Civil, Religious, Literary, and Natural History of the State." Even those who might define the collecting area rather narrowly could scarcely place an arbitrary limit at the political boundaries of the State. The papers of Sibley are a fair example. No one would argue that the papers of a Minnesota delegate in Congress, governor, and fur trader should not be at the society. Yet in the course of his economic, political, and personal interests, Sibley corresponded with men in many parts of the Nation. And so it is with all important groups of personal papers. Business, personal friendships, family relationships, political affiliations, and participation in events that transcend political boundaries make an integral part of the collection materials on many parts of the United States, Canada, and Europe.

Variety in personal papers was natural and excellent. To restrict collecting to "Minnesota" in the narrow sense would have been an unfortunate misinterpretation of the origins and development of the State. The inclusion in the collection of some of the manuscripts cannot, however, be justified by even a strained interpretation of the charter. Among them are Ohio bank notes, the payroll of a Texas cavalry unit, patents for land in Pennsylvania, and association pieces of "famous people" — all with no relation to Minnesotans or Minnesota. Presented because someone thought they were worth saving, they were accepted because freely given.

Since a great deal of such collecting was done, we can conclude that those acting for the society were not sensitive to the limitations implicit in the charter. The institution was new, eager to swell its holdings. It was easier to accept a manuscript than to analyze it and determine whether or not it belonged in the collection. The concern was to save papers from destruction and to increase the size of the collection rather than to adhere to the purposes expressed in the charter.

Another characteristic of collecting in this early period was that it was uncritical. Like other institutions in the same stage of development, the society carefully preserved dozens of trivial items. Manuscripts were treasured simply because they were manuscripts rather than for specific qualities or content. Such a point of view meant, in practical terms, that every manuscript was worthy of permanent preservation. Years passed before collectors became critical enough to screen the records that claimed storage space,

equipment, and staff time. But in historical perspective, even trivial manuscripts may have an importance beyond their content. The society was building a collection, extending its resources to save from destruction records of the past before the darkness of oblivion closed in around them. The papers we may now brand as "waste paper" were preserved by the same enthusiasm, the same love of history, and the same sense of public responsibility that transferred to a place of safekeeping the manuscripts we prize as basic source material.

As superintendent of the society, Solon J. Buck made it clear that he considered the preservation of manuscripts one of the most important functions of the institution. He acknowledged that the collection was already large and valuable, though for the most part inaccessible and unknown. Through his initiative and that of Grace Lee Nute, appointed curator of manuscripts in 1921, manuscripts were acquired in greater volume than ever before. Miss Nute defined the collecting policy explicitly but liberally. She described the broad range of subject matter vital to a Minnesota collection and acted to fulfill the collecting obligation. She wrote thousands of letters and traveled thousands of miles gathering in manuscripts that seemed to be everywhere. Under the superintendencies of Mr. Buck and Theodore C. Blegen, records were collected with a persistence never before equaled in the history of the society. Even today manuscripts are offered in response to requests made years ago by Mr. Buck, Mr. Blegen, and Miss Nute.

The policies that governed the collecting of manuscripts became broad, yet specific. The society accepted papers relating to all phases of Minnesota history, with all their implications. To document the accumulation and use of capital in the State and its manufacturing, marketing, transportation, immigration, and politics necessitated the inclusion of information on other States. But the focal point was Minnesota. Materials, too, were collected on Minnesotans. A man could wander far from his native State and participate in activities remote from Minnesota interest; yet, if he could rightfully be claimed as a Minnesotan, his papers were retained as a unit.

There was one exception to the geographic, subject matter, and personal emphasis of the collecting policy. Through the years quite a notable autograph collection was accumulated. The autographs included signatures of presidents, statesmen, writers, lecturers, educators, scientists, reformers, and other outstanding Americans. Additions made to the group from time to time were usually by-

products of the main collecting activity. For example, a Lincoln letter found in a group of personal papers was cataloged with the personal papers, but a card filed in the calendar of autographs indicated its location.

Miss Nute's recognition of the multiple aspects of a Minnesota collection is illustrated by the manuscripts she collected. There was no diminution of efforts to locate personal papers. But in addition to accentuating activity in an old field of collecting, she added a new one — bringing in papers of organizations. Before 1921, for example, economic life was represented largely in the records of individuals like Franklin Steele, who, with his interests in lumbering, water power, and land, included in his personal papers business transactions undertaken with a group. Sibley, too, retained in his personal papers hundreds of documents created when he was a member of a fur-trading firm, Pierre Chouteau, Jr., and Co. Instances like these can be multiplied by the dozen. However, the collection was in no way representative of economic life in Minnesota, despite the automatic inclusion of economic data in personal papers. To fill in the gaps in information about business, Miss Nute collected records of companies that had operated or were operating in Minnesota. Among them were records of banks, lumber companies, transportation companies, real estate firms, and trade associations. After 30 years of such collecting, the record of business is still far from representative; but every year it becomes more full.

The drive to locate records of organizations was not limited to business. Among other interests touched were labor, cooperatives, churches, civic groups, study clubs, cultural organizations, and political parties. Papers of organizations as well as personal papers were supplemented by microfilm and photostatic copies of related materials in other repositories.

In 1948, when the present curator of manuscripts was appointed, a new age in collecting was full upon us. The development of recording devices gave the collector a new medium for preserving historical information. Effective use of the recorder demanded more than new techniques of interviewing. The new type of information that could now be added to the collection demanded the exercise of discrimination. The "old settler" would still be interviewed. But length of life and casual knowledge of "how things used to be" are not valid criteria for choosing the person to be interviewed. The interviewer seeks people whose experiences are intensive, whose observations are keen, and whose memories are vivid enough to give genuine substance to the interview. No attempt

is made to interview every person connected with an industry or every person who lived through the same experience. A good example is the current project of gathering reminiscences documenting the history of aviation in Minnesota, planned in the fall of 1951 with the cooperation of the Minnesota Aereonautics Commission. From questionnaires sent out to pilots, airport managers, and technicians, the commission and the society select certain people who respond for interviews. All of them are encouraged to write reminiscences, but the interviews are limited to a small number.

Interviews eliciting information that would not otherwise be in the collection had been made even before the use of recorders, though not so effectively. The newest fields opened by the recorder are those in which sound is most vital — story telling, music, and language use. To get records of a lumberjack singing a ballad popular with the woodsmen, a first generation Finnish-American telling a story in his own way, an Irishman chanting square-dance calls that have been used in St. Paul for years — this is now part of the everyday work of a collector. Truly the opportunities in oral history are boundless. The acquisition of a record player was another major step in making use of sound. The society now gathers records on governors' speeches, Indian music, and historical programs that have been broadcast.

Since the staff of the society cannot do justice to the recording possibilities in the State, the local historical societies have been asked to help by working in their own areas. The societies were furnished with "Interviews and Reminiscences," a mimeographed bulletin outlining suggestions for conducting interviews. An important part of this program of cooperation is a central finding list being built up at the society. To facilitate and systematize the recording of information for this finding list, cards with spaces for essential data have been mimeographed for distribution to all those who are doing recording. The oral history project is under way in Minnesota. In the next few years the file of recordings should grow rapidly and the finding list should provide an extensive supplement to the materials we store.

By 1948 heightened awareness of the value of more and more kinds of historical materials, coupled with an increasing volume of manuscripts, brought problems for the collector that could no longer be deferred. In every part of the State are great quantities of manuscripts that should be brought into a repository if we are to fulfill our responsibility as custodian of the State's history. Yet storage space in the historical building will not increase in propor-

tion to the increase in volume of records. In the hundred years the society has been collecting, a change has taken place in the nature of manuscripts. A group of papers numbering several hundred items was considered large in the first decades. By the 1940's personal papers contained many thousands of items, and business papers were reckoned by the ton. The change is clearly indicated in the papers of Henry Hastings Sibley and Knute Nelson. Both were Minnesota governors and representatives in Congress. In private life Sibley was a businessman and Nelson was a lawyer. Both had a wide circle of acquaintances and were considered leaders in the State. Sibley's correspondence, dating from 1815 to 1891, fills 18 boxes, 500 pieces in each box. Nelson's correspondence, dating from 1861 to 1934, fills 266 boxes. Since most collections vary widely in size, the contrast would not be so significant if it were an isolated case.

Explanations for the growth in quantity are not difficult to find. Since manuscripts are now generally brought into the society sooner after their creation than they were in the nineteenth century, fewer are lost through changes in ownership and location. Mechanical duplicating devices have made it easier to create records and have encouraged the production of many copies of one document. In the Sibley papers one rarely finds more than one copy of any manuscript; in fact, we know from other evidence in the papers that there are not even single copies of many of the outgoing letters. In the papers now being acquired, it is not unusual to find as many as five carbon copies of one letter filed under different subject headings. Business records are now more detailed than they once were. Business is represented by more kinds of records and more records of each kind. All these facts mean that groups of manuscripts coming into the collection are many times larger than they were.

Historical information in large groups of manuscripts, item by item, is often more slight than in smaller groups created a hundred years ago. Individuals and organizations are using the form letter so much that single manuscripts often contain little unique information. It may be meaningful only in relation to hundreds of like documents. Moreover, business correspondence in quantity has lost the intimacy that was common in the nineteenth century. Henry Hastings Sibley, writing to traders in the Minnesota country, customarily added to his business reports and inquiries his comments on the general condition of business, on politics, and on personal friends. The increase in the amount of correspondence to be done, the dispersal of correspondence in the firm among many people,

and the development of transportation and communication have all worked to eliminate long informative letters. It would require a more analytical survey than has been made to determine the extent to which information in separate manuscripts is diminishing. But we can say positively that the reader of twentieth-century manuscripts must read more to get a comparable amount of information than must the reader of manuscripts from an earlier time.

Increasing bulk and a corresponding decrease in concentration of information are positive forces in shaping the collecting policy of the society. If the information in a routine or form letter is very meager, the collector must consider whether or not it should be retained. Perhaps the importance of the manuscript, judged in relation to the entire group of papers, is so slight that it should not be kept. For example, the papers of a Minnesotan serving in the United States Senate may contain thousands of letters that seem either routine or strictly form. There may be large numbers of replies to Christmas greetings, routine replies written by his secretary in response to an inquiry made time and time again. The routine and the bulk may be important in themselves. Techniques for eliminating paper must take these research needs into account. Records for certain years may be saved as samples. Routine letters of one type may be grouped and counted. Summaries may be made of the general type and quantity of information without actually saving the paper. In some cases the bulk of a group of manuscripts has been reduced as much as 50 percent through summarizing, counting, eliminating duplicate materials, and microfilming bulky financial records rarely used. Admittedly these devices for reducing bulk are not completely satisfactory, for some historical information is necessarily lost. But with little hope of a tremendous expansion of storage area, some disposition standards, imperfect though they be, must be worked out. The objective is always the same, to reduce the bulk to the smallest amount consistent with historical interest. Donors have become accustomed to this attitude toward manuscripts. It is not unusual for them to say, even before they are asked, "Discard what you do not want," or, "Return what you do not want."

Since the society cannot collect everything, we have felt it imperative to acquire only the best manuscripts available. To find out what there is to collect, we have added new features to our field work. The most important aid to the curator in locating manuscripts is a committee appointed in 1951. The committee represents different areas of the State and different interests. At present the member-

ship consists of two university professors, two businessmen, three attorneys, and a housewife and genealogist. The committee has already proved its usefulness in extending the collecting activity far beyond the resources of the staff and in serving as an advisory group to the curator.

The survey is another method used to learn where manuscripts are and what they are. A survey now in progress of records dealing with aviation and a survey of business records conducted by the Business History Committee in the 1930's are only beginnings. High on the list of projects to be undertaken in the near future are a resurvey of business records, and surveys of the records of churches, cooperatives, and labor unions.

A records service inaugurated in 1952 primarily to offer records management to business is an additional avenue by which manuscripts reach our collection. Since the staff reaches a large number of firms in explaining the records service and in serving clients, the collection of business records should grow in size and variety. Although many firms that have been approached have no records of historical value, this negative information is important too.

With data about records on hand, we can work more closely with the local historical societies in a unified program of collecting. These societies have already proved valuable associates in expanding the total amount of storage space for manuscripts in the State. The State society has accepted a role of leadership in guiding local groups by issuing bulletins containing simplified technical information on handling manuscripts, and by building up a finding list of manuscripts held by the local societies. The finding list will serve the needs of the public until the more important manuscripts can be listed in a State guide to be undertaken cooperatively by all the historical agencies in the State.

Other groups in the State have been helpful in assisting the society to add to its resources without further complicating the storage problem, by giving microfilm copies of their records instead of the originals. The Daughters of the Mayflower (Monument Chapter) and the American Legion Auxiliary led the movement by reducing their bulky records to film. The organizations still hold the originals; thus the microfilm copy at the society is a security copy for them as well as an addition to research resources.

In the scope of this article, the many other activities that contribute to the building of the collection cannot be covered. The Minnesota Historical Society, backed by a rich experience of a hundred years, has undertaken a program commensurate with the

demands, problems, and opportunities of the times. The program rests firmly on the accomplishments of the past; it is shaped to meet the immediate responsibilities of the present; but it looks to the future. In that future is a collection, large yet concentrated, representing every facet of a complex State.