HOW CAN WE IMPROVE OUR HISTORICAL SOCIETIES?

THERE are in the United States today over eight-hundred historical societies. This number includes the several historical associations of national or regional scope which have a scattered membership, made up, for the most part, of academic men and women who teach history. The governing bodies of these associations are generally professional. These associations function with a different presiding officer periodically but they retain a fairly permanent secretary and treasurer. They publish historical journals and occasionally other historical works. They encourage the writing of history and try to exercise a beneficial influence on historical pedagogy. They have no buildings to house historical materials. They are not, in any sense, considered as historical depositories. These organizations serve a useful purpose of a general sort. This article is not concerned with the status or degree of usefulness of such historical societies.

Most organizations known as historical societies, however, are something entirely different. They are state or local societies with both lay and academic members (generally more of the former than the latter.) These historical societies have as their main purpose the collection and preservation of historical materials. To make such preservation possible most state and local historical societies not only have central headquarters, but keep their collections under the roof of some building (however inadequate or crowded the area of this edifice may be). The great majority of such societies, in an effort to promote interest in history and to make the public acquainted with the work they are doing, have museums where selected articles are put on exhibit. A good many also have libraries where investigators and writers may delve into the printed and unprinted collections preserved there. A certain number publicize their holdings by issuing bulletins, quarterly journals, and occasional works of larger scope. Most of them hold meetings at least annually and some societies have occasional lectures for their members and the general public. Though a certain measure of co-operation exists between many of these societies and higher education, especially where the society is located in a college town, the emphasis is generally more on the public school and non-academic levels. This emphasis is particularly

true in such societies as have museums, for visual displays lend themselves to juvenile and popular adult education.

A recent publication issued by the American Association for State and Local History (*Historical Societies in the United States and Canada: A Handbook*) offers a mass of interesting data about these societies. It tells how much or little public support the various organizations have through tax appropriations and which ones are supported by endowments. It tells which organizations issue publications and it gives the name of the official in charge and the number of staff on salary in each instance. All this information is useful and important, but like all statistical compilations the book tells only part (and a very bare and meager part at that) of the entire story.

What the writer would like to know is how large are the book, manuscript, and museum collections of each institution? What portion of these collections are so arranged that they are available for qualified use by the visiting patrons? What is the record and training of the various staff members and how diversified are the tasks of each particular worker? How large is the backlog of unsorted material awaiting attention in these depositories and how could that backlog be best attacked and attended to? Are there any standardized methods of arrangement and cataloguing adopted by any of these institutions or does each have its own individualistic idiosyncracies? How many societies are crowded for space and how many are lacking in competent workers? If all these questions could be answered and a systematic group of statistics drawn up, the resulting facts would prove an astonishing eye-opener.

Lacking such a thorough study the writer attempted a limited bit of preliminary investigation in June, 1944, when she sent a questionnaire with certain of the above queries to some two dozen of the larger and better known historical societies in the country. Even among these, the so-called cream of the crop, all is not well. Vast backlogs of untouched or partly arranged material in various stages of preparation exist in practically every one of these societies. Only one-sixth of the total number to whom the questionnaires were sent, declared that they have an adequate staff to take care of the present load of work and half of these added that they could barely keep up with normal current accessions and would be embarrassed by any unusually large benefactions or purchases. A considerable number of the

workers in these societies have historical training (at various levels), a smaller number have library training, and still fewer have both. A good many have neither. None have specialized training in historical society work as such.

But how can they? How many graduate or undergraduate institutions of this country offer a prospective historical society worker specific training to prepare him for the problems of his job? The late Alexander Wall gave such a course at Columbia University during the Spring semester of 1942. Howard Peckham has taught some classes in manuscript cataloguing at the University of Michigan while he was curator of manuscripts in the Clements Library. Miss Margaret Norton gave a course in archival work at the Library School of Columbia University in 1940. Dr. Ernst Posner and Miss Helen Chatfield have offered courses in federal archives at the American University and the former together with Dr. Morris Radoff announced a brief course in institutional and business archives at the same university in June, 1945.

Except for these isolated instances (which are excellent beginnings) nowhere is there any instruction in a field of work that employs thousands of people, that is of inestimable service to historians, and other writers as well as to investigators in law, government, and economics, and to the public in general. Up to now, national and regional historical societies have not displayed much interest in the promotion and welfare of the eight-hundred-odd historical societies, and the schools of library science have dismissed them under the heading of "Special Libraries," and have made little attempt to train people for this particular specialty. Professors of history, too, though they have had the most intimate dealings with historical societies, have given little thought to the difficulties and the needs of these vital adjuncts of their profession. It remains, therefore, for the personnel in the various historical depositories to make the initial effort and to solve their own dilemma.

Just what is the dilemma? In the opinion of this writer, the whole trouble lies in the fact that working in a historical society has always been an undefined job and not a specific profession. It is a job that can and is held by anyone from a grammar school graduate to a Ph.D. It may be held by a librarian who has never had a single course in history or it may be held by a specialist in the history of the Orient

who has no conception of the history of the United States or of the particular locality in which the society is located. Again, it may be held by someone without even these qualifications. Worst of all, it is all too often held by individuals whose main interest lies in promoting themselves through writing or publicity of various kinds. Sometimes the job is held by someone who has been a misfit at everything else and considers historical society work as a soft, out-of-way berth. Hence the origin of the disparaging comment that those who can, do; the others teach, and those who can't even teach take up historical society work. Then, there are those who are enthusiasts in such quasi-avenues as genealogy, antiquarianism, or just collecting and through these wedges creep into the work. Lastly, there are the esthetes to whom a historical society is just another form of an art gallery and who judge all and sundry by its "artistic" value.

Working in a historical society entails more than just a knowledge of history. One might as well qualify to run a restaurant because one has been a frequent patron of the place. Historians, it is true, frequent the libraries of historical societies but only as patrons where the material they seek is served up to them. Little conception do most of them have of the backbreaking, dirty, exacting jobs of sorting, arranging, cataloguing, labeling, and storing that must precede every piece that they handle so nonchalantly in their search for data. Nor do these casual patrons realize the multitude of jack-of-all-trade duties that a historical society worker must perform.

The first thing a historical society worker must dismiss from his thoughts is the notion that here is a grand opportunity to do some creative writing. If he does not do this he will end up by neglecting all the duties of his job and forfeiting all rights to it. The historical society worker is like the survivor on the raft—water all around him and yet he dare not drink. This tantalizing temptation must be overcome for the good worker must sublimate his own inclinations to serving the needs of others and if he does so faithfully he will find little time for personal research or writing.

Knowing history from a national point of view does not necessarily qualify a person for work in a state or local society. The emphasis is entirely different and a thorough grounding in the local scene is essential for the worker in this field. A historian must readjust his point of view and descend from a sneering approach to one of eye-

to-eye appreciation of the values and importance of the lesser characters and events that make up the history of his country. He will also have to throw aside all misconceptions about his own importance and be content to work like any day-laborer. Historical society work is not meant for those who are afraid to soil their hands or bend their backs; it is physical labor as well as mental application and the sooner the historian learns this fact the better worker he will become.

Training in library science is not adequate preparation for historical society work except in the limited capacity of book cataloguing; museum objects, archives, manuscripts, and maps offer problems which no Dewey or Cutter can answer to satisfaction. Library training may make the worker more aware of the importance of methodology but the multiplicity of objects dealt with in a historical society will either drive him mad or turn him into a pedantic grind. It will be especially difficult for the library graduate who hasn't the saving perspective of training in history. The happy faculty of determining between the essential and the marginal and learning what are "firsts" and what are lesser "musts," when the avalanche of work presses upon one from every direction, is not taught in any school of library science. Book cataloguing is bad enough. In research libraries with their innumerable pamphlets and rare acquisitions these tasks represent the apex of "backlogitis" and only a cataloguer with steady nerves and lack of temperament will bear up under the pressure. Cataloguing and reference work on archives, manuscripts, and museum objects multiplies this problem many times and unless the worker learns how to handle the situation it may swamp him completely.

Ill-equipped as are either of the two types discussed above, they are still much better able to cope with the problem than the amateur enthusiast, the misfit, or the esthete. None of these have any definite place on historical society staffs and their presence only complicates the tasks of the better fitted colleagues. Art plays a certain role in the preparation of museum exhibits but it is only a frill to entice the public and should not be allowed to overshadow the main purpose of historical society work. Historical objects are often far from being works of art, but their lack of artistic glamor should not be allowed to overshadow their historical importance. Artistically inclined staff members may be useful in helping to arrange exhibits, but they are

not to be entrusted to selecting which objects should be preserved and what ones should be discarded. Only someone with proper historical knowledge and sound judgment can make such decisions. Above all, esthetes are seldom methodical and systematic. They may burst forth with bright ideas, but unless they are trained to carry through their plans to a successful culmination they will stir up more trouble than these ideas are worth.

Historical society work is highly technical. Too long already have amateurs been allowed to putter around in hit or miss fashion trying out first one method, then another, and ending up by leaving everything in a hopeless mix-up. One of the great difficulties that prevented historical societies from achieving more than normal benefits from the white-collar projects of WPA was not due to the fault of the WPA workers but rather to the lack of planning and definiteness on the part of the supervisors and sponsors. In many cases, the supervisors had historical knowledge but no practical knowledge in historical society work. In others, the sponsors were so eager to get started that they did not plan the work properly. Too often the regular members of the staff had no methods of their own. Much waste motion and confusion, recurring changes of method, and uncertainty resulted. Nevertheless, through this trial and error method the supervisors learned much and some of the superior ones have remained in historical society work. Too much blame has since been laid at the door of WPA when the fault really lies with the lack of method on the part of regular staff members. Unfortunately, in some societies every change of personnel brings a change in method of arrangement of materials. What wonder that little progress is made? How much better if there would be less puttering and trial balloons. But in order to have system something must be done about the present mushroom growth of historical societies with their untrained staffs.

The question is how and what can be done? If historians are not properly trained for this type of work and library graduates receive no such training, where are we going to turn for our historical society workers? What wonder that misfits, cranks and esthetes creep in to an alarming degree? We have at present no recourse. There is no such individual as a "trained" historical society worker. Just as any quack could at one time practice medicine, any peddler could sell

drugs, and any ignoramus could pose as schoolmaster, so today it is possible for everyone and anyone to secure and hold a position in a historical society or archival agency.

How did medicine evolve from an amateurish status to a profession? How did the pharmacists acquire their present rigid standards? How did school-teaching come to require training and examination? By establishing standards, by requiring specific instruction, and by examining the applicants before admitting them to practice their profession. That is exactly what historical societies will have to do in order to establish a professional status for themselves.

There are in the country today a limited number of men and women with sufficient experience and wisdom to instruct newcomers to advantage. If this group would get together and decide upon common purposes and aims, a clearing-house of methods could be established. In a vague way the American Association for State and Local History is already attempting to do this very thing. But it hasn't gone far enough nor deeply enough into the specific problems that beset the individual workers. Nor has it considered the closely allied problems of the archival depositories, public and private. All of these organizations have kindred difficulties and only in a central clearing house can these be ironed out satisfactorily to the advantageous assistance of all kinds of record-keeping depositories.

That is only one step, however. We also need courses to be offered in the colleges and universities—courses which will give the prospective historical society "technician" a background in manuscripts, archives, museum work, historical publication, administration, etc. The selected archival courses mentioned earlier are a good beginning, but they are too specialized for the average historical society worker and there are too few even of these. These courses, to be of most direct benefit, should be general enough to give valuable information to the worker from Podunk as well as the archivist in Washington. These should be followed up or combined with "in-service" training in which the student will get laboratory practice in various types of work. Graduates of such courses will not find too much difficulty in securing positions in historical societies and archival depositories and, as they gradually begin to filter into the various institutions, they will establish a leavening influence that will rise and spread. In due time, only qualified professional technicians will carry on this work

and not only will the societies flourish, but all those who frequent such places will benefit greatly. Materials will be properly catalogued in accordance with an accepted system; backlogs will be dug into with vigor; there will be less lost, strayed, or stolen articles; no valuable materials will be thrown away through ignorance and artistic trifles will not retain places of honor. In other words, historical societies will become efficient workshops staffed by well-trained men and women who will open these vast treasures for the benefit of all those who are qualified. Then only will historical societies actually merit their titles.

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