

# The Collection and Preservation of Local Historical Pictures in the Minneapolis Public Library

By RUTH THOMPSON

*Minneapolis Public Library<sup>1</sup>*

THIS article deals with my work during the past few years in collecting and preserving local historical pictures for the Minneapolis Public Library. This institution, always excelling in up-to-date service, had never emphasized the importance of local history material, especially those more ephemeral kinds which, even in a library usually land in the waste paper basket. The one reason, perhaps, was our proximity to the Minnesota Historical Society with its great collections in St. Paul. Minneapolitans however, began to be more and more interested in their own history and often wanted pictures to illustrate it. For instance, an advertizing artist needed a picture of, say, the Exposition Building, a club woman wanted pictures for her topic about early Minneapolis churches, and a school child asked for pictures of Father Hennepin and other early explorers in this region. All these patrons needed this pictorial material for circulation right away. To meet this growing demand the collection of local history pictures was begun in earnest.

In reviewing the development of this service, I recall this remark made about a local history enthusiast. "Minnesota has two historical societies. One of them is known by that name. The other one is Edward A. Bromley, Minneapolis newspaper man." Mr. Bromley made it his hobby to collect early negatives and photographs of local scenes and people. Away back in 1878 he purchased views of Minneapolis and St. Paul from B. F. Upton, one of the first daguerreotypists in the Northwest. He also bought the negatives of the Whitney Gallery, the oldest in St. Paul, the W. H. Jacoby Gallery of Minneapolis, and other early photographic studios. As a reporter and photographer for many years on the *Minneapolis Journal*, Mr. Bromley photographed many

<sup>1</sup> Miss Thompson retired on April 16, 1946, after this paper had been submitted and accepted for publication.

local scenes and citizens. He also went out among the Minnesota Indians in search of material for illustrated feature stories.

In 1914 Mr. Bromley sold a selection of 1800 negatives and 200 lantern slides to the Minneapolis Public Library. In writing to the Library Board about this sale, he stated: "As the result of my efforts I have obtained and collected negatives which otherwise would have been destroyed, and have been able to make and preserve negatives and views which will be of great interest and value to the coming generation and which will play an *important part in the ultimate history of this region*. This work has been a labor of love and what some people would call a 'fad' on my part."

A true prophecy! Surely many persons have become more loyal and intelligent Minneapolitans through looking at pictures of the "Falls of St. Anthony, 1853," the "first house in Minneapolis, 1848," the "first Suspension Bridge, 1855," the "Union School, 1857," and scores of other pictures of as great historical importance in the Bromley Collection. It must not be inferred, however, that this library is the sole possessor of the Bromley negatives. Mr. Bromley made many photographs and copies of negatives from his original collection, and sold them to the local newspapers and interested persons. Many of these pictures have found their way into the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. I mention Mr. Bromley and his hobby not as biography, but as exhortation—"Go and do thou likewise." There are pictorial records in every community. Finding them is a worth while task for some interested person, perhaps, the librarian, a worker in a local historical society, or a public spirited citizen. A good example of this is found in Red Wing, Minnesota, where the late Mr. C. A. Rasmussen, president of the Goodhue County Historical Society, has specialized in collecting pictures of all the churches in the County, some of them being among the oldest in the State. Another example is Fred W. Johnson of New Ulm, Minnesota, who has been president of the Brown County Historical Society during its entire existence. He has been called New Ulm's "One Man Historical Society." In the county historical museum Mr. Johnson, besides his many other collections, has mounted on uniform sheets the printed and pictorial history of Brown County.

To return to the Bromley Collection. As an assistant in the Art Department of the library I classified and arranged these negatives. When the study of Minnesota history was introduced into the Minneapolis schools, I prepared, following the study outline, a large selection of circulating photographs, reproduced largely from the Bromley negatives. Older patrons also began to find this collection very useful. Every

kind of picture relating to Minneapolis was saved. Many came from the rotogravure sections of the newspapers, especially from the *Minneapolis Journal*, which had a flair for local history. Interested patrons sent in welcome contributions to the enterprise.

In 1940 the Minneapolis Library Board established the "Minneapolis Collection" with a separate alcove (library space was too limited for a separate room) in which to house "Minneapolisiana." The overflow of local history pictures now found a home. In the collection there are now approximately 10,000 pictures arranged in vertical files for convenient reference. This system follows the arrangement used in the Art Department, which in turn uses an adaptation of the simple scheme devised by John Cotton Dana of the Newark Public Library. This system has become well-known through the book published by the Newark Library, *The Picture Collection* now in its fifth edition. According to this plan pictures are filed alphabetically by subject in vertical files. The unmounted pictures on any one subject are kept in manila paper folders, while the mounted pictures on the same subject are put directly back of the folder, or in front if one so decides. This arrangement seems almost too easy to be effective, but such is not the case. We quote from *The Picture Collection*.

No arrangement is as good as an alphabetical one by subject because the pictures under this arrangement need not be catalogued, but are self-indexing. They are filed vertically like cards in a catalogue and the names of the subject under which they are arranged are written near the tops of the mounts. They can be easily consulted and pictures on any desired subject easily found. As occasion arises, cross references are inscribed on blank standard sized mounts and filed in their proper alphabetical sequence throughout the picture file. The edges are tipped with a bright strip of paper to distinguish them from the rest of the file.

In the well-equipped Newark Library over-size plates and pictures are also arranged alphabetically according to the same subject headings as the smaller pictures and stored horizontally in specially constructed compartments below the picture boxes. In the Minneapolis Collection they are, we hope, only temporarily arranged in the drawers of an antique black walnut secretary, which besides offering this useful service, imparts an old-fashioned, comfortable atmosphere to the Bay Window Alcove. The large framed pictures and maps are also stored out of sight behind this benevolent old secretary. No pictures in the Collection are of more use than these framed ones, most of them gifts from Minneapolitans moving from spacious homes into smaller ones. They are loaned for exhibits, anniversary and other celebrations. During the Minneapolis Centennial Celebration in 1938 they were exhibited

in the show windows of many downtown establishments. The walls of the Alcove are adorned with two old oil paintings by Henry Lewis, early panoramist of the Mississippi River; one of Fort Snelling, the other of the Falls of St. Anthony. Another treasure is a water color painting of these Falls by Captain Seth Eastman, Commandant at Fort Snelling in the 1840's. Another choice painting of the Falls by a pioneer Minneapolis artist, Alexander F. Loemans, has just been presented to the Collection by Mrs. A. J. Russell in memory of her husband, a newspaper columnist and local historian.

Some photographs of earlier Minneapolitans are appropriately kept in old-time family albums. A patron recently gave an old album bought in a second-hand book store. Impossible to identify any of the photographs, their backs instead of their faces are displayed, showing the names of many early Minneapolis and St. Paul photographic galleries. So every little bit of local history material seems to find a meaning all its own. The old stereographs furnish a real thrill with their presentation in three dimensions of early Minneapolis scenes. Then there are the old post cards with their views growing more precious all the time. Many stereopticon slides have been added to the original Bromley Collection. Comprehensive historical lectures accompany most of these slides, which are circulated from the Art Department.

It seems strange that so little attention has been given to the collection and preservation of historical pictures, both general and local. Romana Javitz, Supt. of the Picture Collection in the New York Public Library, wrote in the *Wilson's Bulletin*, November 1943: "Since libraries concern themselves with people and their heritage, with bringing to them the record of the past life and studies of man, they should more consciously accept the organization and availability of pictorial documents as an essential library service." Apply this advice to your own local community and collect its pictorial material. No project will more surely interest people in their library. They like to feel that the library is interested in them and in the history of their locality. They will send in gifts which are priceless, for they could never have been purchased.

From the standpoint of accuracy and historical evidence nothing is more dependable than a photograph. A painting or an illustration by an artist of an historical scene may be more or less fabricated by the imagination, but a photograph is seldom "faked." It presents "incontrovertible evidence" as the defense counsel for the Nazi war criminals had to admit after the showing of documentary films at the Nuremberg trials. A picture can reveal its meaning much more readily than can a written or verbal description. The Chinese have that oft-quoted proverb for this: "One picture is worth ten thousand words."

The method of selecting historical pictures differs somewhat from that used for a general picture collection. The person who makes the selection must have historical knowledge, perspective, a "feel" for the past, and the realization that "today is tomorrow's history." She should not be influenced by artistic considerations, for historical pictures are often far from being works of art. A general picture collection is at its best when all the pictures are uniformly mounted. On the contrary historical pictures should be kept as nearly as possible in their original condition. Newspaper cut-outs, easily worn and torn, however, should be mounted for durability. In the Minneapolis Collection such pictures are neatly trimmed with a cutting machine, mounted solidly with library paste, and then placed under a heavy weight for several days. An old iron letter press could do a better job. Skill and artistry, however, will succeed in making a smooth durable, pasted mount. The use of rubber cement results in an excellent appearance, but in time the rubber hardens and the picture loosens. Dry gelatine tissue can also be used, especially for mounting photographs.

The historical pictures in the Minneapolis Collection are not for general circulation—the pictures in the Art Department can supply that need, but are used for reference or taken out on special permit by research patrons who need this more detailed and comprehensive selection. Commercial artists, advertizing men, illustrators and authors are among the most frequent users. The simple classification of the pictures seems to have one advantage. Often patrons do not ask for a specific picture, but need the inspiration which comes from looking over different folders on a variety of subjects. The material in the pamphlet and clipping files of the Collection is arranged under the same subject headings as the pictures. Often pictures with the text supplement the separate pictures.

Minneapolis seems to have reached the age when many of its churches, schools, business concerns and other institutions are celebrating their fiftieth or seventy-fifth anniversaries. The pictures in the Collection have helped a great deal in making these celebrations successful. Here is one recent example. A prominent lithographing firm in honoring its organization in the early '80's has been running a series of advertisements in the morning paper for over a year. These illustrate and also describe a building or civic event which was well-known during the early years of the firm. A compilation of these "ads" will make an interesting illustrated history of Minneapolis several decades ago.

Often the large general collection in the Art Department is used to supplement the Minneapolis Collection. In the thorough research for the "Minnesota Document," a moving picture review of Minnesota's history produced by the Visual Education Service of the University of

Minnesota, those preparing it studied many pictures on various subjects, such as lumbering, mining, railroading, flour milling, farming, home and public life, military and civilian costumes, even to hair-do's and whiskers. Besides furnishing information and inspiration to authors for their writings, the pictures are often used as illustrations in their books. Sometimes an unexpected service can be rendered by the half tone cuts which the Minneapolis Civic and Commerce Association turned over to the library after its quarterly, *Minneapolis*, ceased publication.

So we might go on indefinitely emphasizing the usefulness of local history pictures. There is no end to either collection or potential use.

In 1937 workers on the WPA historical project completed a pictorial history of Minneapolis and Hennepin County. This file consists of 3500 photographs of uniform size, 5 by 7 inches. Each photograph is indexed and can be referred to instantly by number. Pictures in old library books and magazines were copied, as well as some pictures in private collections. Copies were also made from pictures in the historical files of the different City departments, as Fire, Water, Police, and Parks; also from such companies as the Street Railway, Telephone, and other institutions. New photographs were taken of current Minneapolis scenes and events. A start was made in photographing historic buildings and residences. This work should have been carried on by an official library photographer when the WPA ceased. It is not always feasible to preserve an old building, but pictures of it could keep it forever in memory. Such an enterprise carried on in different parts of the State would greatly facilitate the work of a committee of the Minnesota Historical for the preservation of historic buildings, which is under the chairmanship of Professor Laurence Schmeckebier of the Department of Fine Arts in the University of Minnesota.

This collection of local history pictures in the Minneapolis Public Library is small and incompletely arranged in comparison with the huge, thoroughly classified and analyzed collection in the Museum of the Minnesota Historical Society. In *Minnesota History* for December, 1934, there appears an article by Willoughby Babcock, former Curator of the Museum, entitled, "Cataloguing pictorial source material." In introducing his description of the high standards attained in the Museum in the care of historical pictures. Mr. Babcock quotes a significant paragraph from J. Fletcher Williams, early secretary of the Society. I close this article with this quotation as an inspirational message to everyone interested in local history. The Minnesota Historical Society has always followed Mr. Williams' good advice with wonderful results. Let us all become as wise and foresighted in collecting and preserving

the pictorial materials of our own communities. "Photography," wrote Mr. Williams in 1875, "is one of the most valuable aids in preserving history that we have. . . . The collection of photographs of our scenery in its natural state, before it was, or will be marred by the hand of man—or our ever changing and rapidly growing towns and cities—of our scenes and localities of historical interest and pride—of our early settlers and prominent pioneers and public men—of our Indian inhabitants, scarce noticed by our present generation, but destined to possess a wondrous interest to those who succeed us when that strange people have passed away—all these have been among our main objects."