

THE WASTE IN PRIVATE HANDS.

Since the organization of the Historical Department we have often had occasion to learn how soon and how sadly the most precious books, documents and other memoranda, are lost or destroyed, when retained in private hands. True, there are private collectors, and occasionally other private persons, who carefully preserve whatever comes into their possession; but these are only exceptions to the general rule. Losses occur from accident, neglect, fires—in fact, in numerous ways. The most of these objects are within very short periods, utterly wiped out. This is really the order of nature. Thoreau, the poet-naturalist of New England, deemed it a wholesome thing that houses should be burned with their contents, once about every so many years, in order that there should not be too great accumulations of what he considered mere rubbish! And looking to periods somewhat longer than we have in contemplation at this time, Dr. Holmes sets forth in "The One-Hoss Shay," that:

" Little of all we value here
Wakes on the morn of its hundredth year."

What has most annoyed the writer of this item is simply this: That it has become so very difficult to procure certain early Iowa documents, implements, utensils in use fifty years ago, or even specimens of fire-arms with which our early settlers destroyed game and drove back the Indians. Up to this time we have not been able to secure one of the guns carried in the Spirit Lake Expedition of 1857. We can easily recall the days when flint-lock muskets, which came down from the Revolutionary War, or the War of 1812, were quite plenty in almost every neighborhood. They were always certain to be brought out in western New York at the Company and "General Trainings" of the "barefoot militia." But they are now only to be met with in museums. So of scores of articles which would at this time be veritable *curios*, as showing the customs and handicrafts of our fathers. One of our old-time:

Iowa physicians—Hon. S. G. Matson, of Linn County, who still happily survives, and to some extent practices his profession—has sent to the Historical Department, not only a great deal in the way of precious early literature, but the antiquated “pill-bags,” surgical instruments and portmanteaus, which he used half a century ago. But where an individual is thus careful to preserve such objects, one might search the whole State over and not find another.

The plain deduction from all this is, that if the reader happens to own valuable books, documents, autograph letters, manuscripts, or other objects of historical or archaeological value, the best disposition that can be made of them is to place them in some public collection where the building is fire-proof, and where systematic care will be taken of its contents. In our efforts to obtain early Iowa newspapers we often hear that such and such files have been lost in fires. Several Iowa journalists have freely presented their files to the Historical Department, because of this constant danger of fires. In our beautiful capitol all such objects are not only well cared for, in no danger from dampness, the ravages of insects or fires, but are always accessible to the public. If one does not feel like surrendering the ownership of such articles, they may be loaned to the State. It is a well-known fact that some of the finest museums in the country are largely made up of loan collections. Even the great National Museum at Washington, exhibits and cares for hundreds of objects thus loaned to it. The best thought upon this topic is doubtless this: That as a general rule these loans are seldom called for. The practice, however, is an excellent one, for the people are benefited, the objects are always preserved and may be repossessed if necessary.

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