THE CHANGING HISTORICAL SOCIETY

*By Russell W. Fridley**

This occasion calls attention to an achievement that actually took place three years ago when William J. Petersen successfully concluded his drive to raise $150,000. Bill's remarkable performance made the Centennial Building of the State Historical Society of Iowa a reality. Its construction in the year that marked the hundredth anniversary of the Society's birth dramatically demonstrated that centennials CAN yield results of permanent value.

The story of the State Historical Society of Iowa — like that of similar organizations largely supported by public funds — reflects the same initial hopes, the small beginnings, the minute first budget — in this instance only $250 — the continuing endeavor to grow and expand in influence, the constant experimentation that met with occasional success and frequent failure, the periods of neglect and stagnation, and the all too infrequent periods of strong leadership that made possible those rare leaps forward — one of which we observe today.

A significant fact in the Iowa story is that agitation for a state historical society began early, at least 19 years before the establishment of this institution. In September, 1838, three months after the Territory of Iowa was created, a plea for a historical society appeared in the *Iowa Territorial Gazette and Burlington Advertiser*. "Almost every state of the union can now boast of its Historical Society," the paper said. "Why, then, we have often asked ourselves, is Iowa without one?" Five years later a historical society was organized in Burlington, but fourteen years passed before the present state society was started in Iowa City in 1857.

In this era of the 1850's, when both the historical society and the state were young, Iowa's history is symbolic for the nation. When Iowa entered the Union in 1846, it was the first state free from slavery to be carved from Thomas Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase. It seemed to symbolize a trend

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toward a growing bond between the North and the West and the increasing remoteness of these two sections from the South. When President James K. Polk signed the action that made Iowa a state in December, 1846, the United States was in the midst of a period of creative expansion. The philosophy of manifest destiny was in full flower, and the American nation was flexing its muscles as it pushed its national boundaries westward to the Pacific. By 1849 the Oregon Trail had opened a new route for adventurous settlers headed for newly acquired Oregon Territory. Texas and California had been added to the Union as a result of the Mexican War; the Mormons had trekked across the plains to found Utah; and the forty-niners rolled westward in a human tide seeking Eldorado in the gold fields of California.

A great surge of immigrants settled the Iowa prairies and forests during the mid-nineteenth century. In the four years between 1852 and 1856 the state's population more than doubled, and Samuel Clemens, later better known as Mark Twain, was living in Keokuk as a boarder at the old Billings house. From its veranda in 1857 he could see the Mississippi, which he was destined to immortalize in American literature. Up in Council Bluffs, the guardians of the town's morals were outraged to discover that Mrs. Amelia Bloomer and her husband had settled in their midst. After the furor created by Mrs. Bloomer's startling innovations in women's dress, she moved to Iowa in 1853 in an attempt to regain her health. She lived here for many years, and later became president of the Iowa Women's Suffrage movement, working quietly and sanely to obtain equal rights for women until her death in 1894.

When the State Historical Society of Iowa was founded in 1857, the tensions that divided the nation and led to the Civil War were already smoldering. In 1846, Iowa had been on the remote frontier, the edge of nowhere. By 1857 it was the interior, the middle west, rather than the West. In 1846 America had been confident and united; by 1857 it was bitterly divided and headed for tragedy. The division was heightened by such political instruments as the Compromise of 1850 with its Fugitive Slave Law; Stephen A. Douglas' Kansas-Nebraska Bill, which was introduced in Congress in 1854 and which effectively upset the precarious balance maintained on the slavery issue. The later 1850's were the period of Bleeding Kansas — a grim preview of the Civil War and the explosive Dred Scott Decision. On the horizon were the Lincoln-Douglas Debates in which the two men from Illinois would search for an answer to the insoluble

problem of slavery in the territories; and finally, of John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry. Thus, in a few short years the America that had worked to a larger and more united nation watched the Union break up along sectional lines. By 1857, the "irrepressible conflict" seemed unavoidable.

It was here in Iowa, by the way, that Brown collected the arms and ammunition to be used in his ill-fated raid on Harper's Ferry. And the raid had an interesting sequel in which Iowa was again involved. Several citizens of the Hawkeye State had taken part in the attack on Harper's Ferry, and when Virginia requested the apprehension and delivery of the youthful Barclay Coppoc of Springdale, Iowa, for his part in the affair, Iowa's Governor Kirkwood discovered legal and technical flaws in the Virginia extradition papers and declined to surrender Coppoc. Hawkeye citizens formed an armed guard about Springdale to prevent Coppoc's arrest. By the time Virginia corrected the defects in the papers, Coppoc had escaped to safety in Canada with funds contributed by Iowans.

These incidents suggest only a few of the many strands in Iowa's history, over which the State Historical Society has presided for 103 of the state's 114 years. The significance of its work has been intensified by the quality of the Iowa story. Few states as young as Iowa have had so interesting and meaningful a history. The Hawkeye State served as a crossroads for movements that shaped the course of our nation's development — Indian migrations, explorations, steamboating, railroads, and the westward movement of frontier settlement. It is doubtful that any state has produced larger or more varied array of national personalities within the span of a century. Iowa's native sons and daughters include a president — Herbert Hoover; a vice-president — Henry A. Wallace, and 14 members of presidential cabinets, among them four secretaries of agriculture — two Henry Wallaces, E. T. Meredith, and "Tama" Jim Wilson, who held the post for 16 years, longer than any other man in the nation's history. Others who called Iowa home are U. S. Supreme Court Justices Samuel F. Miller and Wiley B. Rutledge, Harry Hopkins, John L. Lewis, William F. Cody, evangelist Billy Sunday, Carrie Chapman Catt, Senators William Boyd Allison, Albert Cummins and James Dolliver, Populist leader James B. Weaver, Attorney Joseph Welch, and authors James Norman Hall, Ruth Suckow, and MacKinlay Kantor. These and many others have enlivened and enriched the texture of the story of the Hawkeye State, a story that is and will be preserved in the building we dedicate today.

The Centennial Building is the first home the Iowa Society has owned. This fact in itself is likely to affect the future character of the institution. The growth of the Society in its second century will doubtless be accompanied by new opportunities and challenges. Its basic purposes — the collection, preservation, and dissemination of Iowa's history — will remain unchanged, but the means it chooses to achieve these ends are certain to differ from those employed during its first century. It is obvious, I think, that the historical society of 1960 must respond with imagination and innovation to the problems presented by an aging nation and a rapidly changing world. This challenge was cogently stated by George F. Kennan recently when he said: "More history is probably written today than at any time in the past; and with respect to distant ages, once largely lost to historical knowledge, we are no doubt making progress. But with respect to the doings of our fathers and grandfathers, or even our elder brothers, we are, I fear, fighting a losing battle."[1]

For example, in trying to determine what and how much to collect, we must come to grips with the appalling mass of 20th century records. Today's manuscripts collections are larger and often of less value than they might have been a century ago. The resources of most preservation agencies are already badly taxed and they are being forced to pick and choose carefully, improvising new standards to weigh the size and richness of each individual collection on the scales of potential historical value.

How historical materials can best be preserved once they have been collected is another problem that challenges the historical society of 1960. Intricate cataloging systems employed by all too meager staffs seem more and more unequal to the task of efficiently organizing vast collections to answer the increasingly more specific questions of the user. Then, too, other types of historical materials have gained prominence and require preservation. Pictures, for example, have become more valued in recent years, and the historic site has been a successful intruder in cornering a significant share of some historical agency budgets.

Undoubtedly, the weakest activity in many historical society programs has been in the area of dissemination and interpretation. Not only have most historical agencies failed to reach the public at large, but the public image of what a historical society is and does has weakened the effectiveness

[1] George F. Kennan, "The Experience of Writing History," *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Spring, 1960, p. 213.

of our efforts. In traveling around Minnesota, I am amazed by the number of people who have no accurate conception of the purpose of a historical society. Too often they believe it exists solely for genealogists or antique collectors or that it is a closed corporation serving only the wealthy and the elderly. Too often the man in the street regards the historical society as frivolous, or lacking in permanent value and pertinency for the space age. In this respect, we have done a colossally poor job of selling ourselves. We have failed to convince large segments of the population that we perform a meaningful function.

The publications programs of historical societies offer one of the best and most neglected means of explaining an institution's purposes, reaching various age and interest groups, and disseminating and interpreting that which is meaningful in state and local history. But printing is expensive. This brings us to one of the major dilemmas of the historical society of 1960: how much scholarly activity can such an institution afford? How much popularizing should it do?

Some of my colleagues I am sure would argue that scholarship and popularization are incompatible and must be carried on under separate roofs. They feel that the library, manuscripts collection, and historical journal should be separated from the historic site tour and the museum exhibit. While popularizing activities are full of pitfalls, I believe the two functions can prosper in one institution and that each can strengthen and aid the other. In many cases, for example, efforts to popularize history have yielded desperately needed funds to carry on scholarly activities. These scholarly activities, in turn, provide the popularizer with the facts he must have before he can begin work. The big problem, it seems to me, is one of balance — how to preserve a balanced program in the face of many conflicting demands. This has become increasingly difficult in recent years as history has become more and more profitable. The tourist trade has been quick to seize upon history's popular appeal and drawing power, and commercialization is all too apparent as tourist traps multiply and promoters of inaccurate centennial albums flourish. More than ever before, the historical society is required to prevent the distortion and cheapening of its product — the accurate interpretation of the history of its area.

The fundamental problem, of course, is one of inadequate resources. As a state like Iowa ages and its population increases, the job of preserving its history becomes more intricate and difficult. This situation is not likely to

change in the foreseeable future. One possible way, I believe, of coping with many of our problems is through more cooperative action. The value of the Association has already been demonstrated, and the organization will, I think, be of even greater value as our mutual problems multiply. The Association's efforts to secure legislation to give historical agencies more favorable tax exemption benefits should be encouraged and supported. Numerous other matters demanding attention might also be handled through concerted action by the Association.

The abundance of problems should not, however, discourage us as to the value of the historical society's contribution today. George Kennan writes:

> It may be true that it is becoming increasingly difficult to reconstruct an adequate record of the past. . . . It may be true that we are condemned to explore only tiny and seemingly unrelated bits of a pattern already too vast for any of us to encompass, and rapidly becoming more so. All these things, to my mind, merely make the effort of historical scholarship not less urgent but more so.[2]

As the challenges of the 1960's pour in upon us, it is easy to lose sight of our basic job and our ultimate goal — the deepening of our people's understanding of history. A need for a widespread sense of history among Americans has never been greater. Our age is that of the specialist and technician. An increasing number of people seem to know more and more about a restricted subject and less and less about the world of which they are a part. Although our physical frontiers are expanding into space, greater conformity is developing among us, and opportunities to share moral and intellectual values are diminishing. To avoid being overwhelmed by the passing scene, we as individuals need to see our world in perspective — to understand it in terms of what has gone before. Today there are vital reasons for understanding and perpetuating the ties that hold our increasingly disparate and complex world together — the common heritage of traditions, customs, and values that cements individuals into groups and binds groups into communities and nations. Also we need to be reminded of the nature of the species we belong to, and of both the limitations and possibilities of the human condition. It is a reminder that history, and history alone, can give. History, above all, offers us an opportunity to better understand ourselves and our fellowman. Transmitting this realization to the people is the greatest challenge facing us in the 1960's.

[2] Kennan, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Spring, 1960, p. 214.