

HISTORICAL SOCIETY PERIODICALS — PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

By Bertha L. Heilbron*

For one who has been associated with a historical society periodical over more than four decades, the question "Does it have a future?" raised as the theme of this session is a bit disconcerting. That there is a future, and a bright one, for historical society magazines seems to me to go without saying. Doubters, I should think, need only look to the centennial and other anniversary celebrations that are looming on the horizon of the 1960's to find convincing evidence that historical society editors are not likely to run out of copy in the immediate future. And they need only compare some recent issues of state historical magazines with examples from the 1920's and 1930's to be convinced that such periodicals have improved greatly in appearance, readability, and audience appeal — qualities which assure a future not only for the magazines themselves, but for the organizations which publish them and use them as inducements to membership.

A glance at some of the early magazines issued by state societies leaves one with the impression that they were singularly uninspired, both as to content and format. It is surprising, in fact, that they had sufficient vitality to survive at all. One would hardly expect to be fascinated by the *Circular Letter* issued by the Massachusetts Historical Society as early as 1791, or by articles in the pioneer volume of *Memoirs* published by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 1826. By 1877 the Pennsylvania organization had established its own *Magazine of History and Biography*, which, now in its eighty-fourth volume, is still a leading example of the solid, conservative historical quarterlies that are geared in large measure to appeal to scholars.

Today, however, I am going to comment chiefly on the Midwest quarterlies with which I am most familiar. (Perhaps I should ask you to bear with me if I draw too many of my examples from *Minnesota History*, the

*Bertha L. Heilbron, editor of *Minnesota History* and other publications of the Minnesota Historical Society at Saint Paul.

magazine that has been my own center of interest for so many years.) It was in the Midwest that men like Benjamin F. Shambaugh, Solon J. Buck, and Milo M. Quaife — pioneering editors all — inaugurated and promoted a publication program that has resulted in historical quarterlies as most of us know them today.

One of the earliest in the Midwest — the *Ohio Historical Quarterly* — began publication on the centennial of the Ordinance of 1787. Shortly after the turn of the century, in 1903, the quarterly now issued by William J. Petersen — the IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS — was founded by Professor Shambaugh; and before the first decade of the new century came to a close, in 1905 and 1908, Indiana and Illinois had established periodicals. Historical publication activity next moved westward into Minnesota, where Solon J. Buck inaugurated what was originally known as the *Minnesota History Bulletin* in 1915. Two years later Wisconsin and Michigan followed the Minnesota example.

Statements about purposes and plans were included in some quarterlies when they first appeared. Most of these pioneer journals were intended to supplement earlier series of *Collections*, and they were designed for members of the societies which issued them. In content they usually followed a set pattern, composed as they were largely of papers prepared for meetings, reports on such sessions, occasional documents, obituaries accompanied by portraits of deceased celebrities, book reviews often evaluating the *Transactions* or *Proceedings* of other societies, lists of members and donors, and news notes. The latter might deal with the society's activities, and sometimes they even announced promotions in university history departments. The implication is, of course, that the membership rolls of these early twentieth century societies were composed largely of professional historians.

Nevertheless, in the first number of the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Dr. Quaife expressed the hope that the new magazine would appeal to what he called "ordinary" readers among the society's members, noting that "scholars have plenty of historical reviews, but no publication meets the needs" of those outside the historical profession. Thus Quaife demonstrated an awareness of the wider audience for which so many journals of our own day are designed. Following Wisconsin's lead, Nebraska in 1918 began to issue a monthly which was intended as a "piece of popular literature, as distinguished from academic."

The pioneer historical quarterlies had certain physical characteristics in

common which, like their contents, limited their audience appeal. Most of them were drab in appearance, poorly designed, and badly printed. Unattractive type faces, uneven press work, and ugly margins are among the limitations that must have repelled the average reader. In format the early historical journals were amateurish publications designed by novices who all too frequently employed commercial printers totally lacking in the experience and equipment required for book and magazine production.

Actually, the periodicals that were offered as inducements for historical society membership in the first few decades of the present century were little more than house organs — publications designed to appeal to a small and limited group. Some of their special membership functions have been assumed by monthly news sheets in many states today — among them Iowa and Minnesota.

With all their limitations, however, these pioneering periodicals put into print scores of articles, papers, and documents that will long be useful to scholars and writers. In most instances, these contributions can be located through annual, and sometimes consolidated indexes. The ability to compile a good index is a skill needed by every editor. Such work, as we all know, presents special problems. Care notwithstanding, printed indexes sometimes are marred by startling entries. For example, one of the very first index entries in a history of a certain western state informs the startled user that "all were drunk, including children." And some of you may have heard of the entry under B, doubtless inserted in the index of a recent medical work by a wag who was bored with proofreading. It reads, "Birds, for the," and it is followed by the inclusive pages of the bulky tome.

Fortunate is the historical society that can afford to issue consolidations of the indexes to its quarterly at more or less regular intervals — say, once in a decade, as is true of Wisconsin. The Minnesota Historical Society made a valiant beginning by publishing a consolidated index for ten volumes issued between 1915 and 1929. Regrettably, the society has been unable to continue the practice, for both its staff and its financial resources are insufficient for that purpose. By present estimates it would cost some twenty-five thousand dollars to combine the indexes issued regularly for the last twenty-six volumes. In relation to the size of the consulting audience, this sum seems altogether too large to be practical, though some would condemn the society for failing to put its slender resources to such use. Costs notwithstanding, a number of excellent consolidations are available — notably

a *Cumulative Index* for volumes 1 to 40 of the IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS, issued in parts from 1944 to 1946, and a combined index for volumes 26 through 50 of the Indiana magazine. The latter, incidentally, was financed by the Lilly Endowment, and it sold for five dollars. Contrast this figure with the price of sixty-five dollars charged for an index for volumes 1 to 75 of the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*. I, for one, would like to know whether enough copies were sold to cover the cost of editing and printing this formidable work.

Turning now to the contemporary scene, we are all aware that state and regional historical publications have been marked by some drastic changes since the 1920's. They fall under two main headings — content and format.

Few Midwest historical journals of our own day are cluttered with annual reports, accounts of meetings, lists of members and donors, and similar items. Some stress specialties — Illinois has a strong Lincoln flavor (as we might well expect); Indiana features medical history; Iowa has been issuing a notable series of documents relating largely to the Civil War; Minnesota at intervals has devoted more than the ordinary amount of space to exploration, immigration, and pictorial history. On the basis of personal experience, I will hazard the guess that such specialties reflect the interests of individual editors. The periodicals mentioned, as well as many others, confine themselves largely to the histories of their own states or immediate areas, with numerous articles geared to appeal to an audience which includes both laymen and professional historians. Some historical society quarterlies, however, step far beyond state and even regional bounds. *Montana*, which began only a decade ago with a magazine "designed to preserve, to publish, and to promote interest in the history of Montana," has expanded its subject matter until it now claims to be the "most widely read journal of authentic old West Americana in existence." And Wisconsin has gone even farther afield. Although many of its articles deal with local subjects, often in reminiscent form, the *Wisconsin Magazine of History* devoted the bulk of a recent issue to a "Soviet View of the American Past," and it has reviewed books on such far-flung topics as "Modern Europe in World Perspective," "Tsarist Russia and Balkan Nationalism," and even the "Dead Sea Scrolls," while frequently disregarding substantial contributions to the history of its own Midwest.

Although many state historical journals include occasional unannotated articles, most of them still furnish footnotes for scholars and students. The

right to know where an author obtained his material still demands consideration, even in an age of popularization. Readers who are exposed to annotated articles in issue after issue may well come after a time to agree with Andre Maurois, who once confessed: "There was a time when I was afraid of footnotes. I thought they made reading less pleasant. I have found since that not only do they *not* hamper the reader — but, if they are properly printed, they reassure him."

And that expression, "properly printed," brings us to the whole subject of format, which, like content, represents the attempt of contemporary state historical journals to reach out beyond academic and antiquarian circles. The designs of some modern state magazines reflect in a striking manner the strides made in the last three decades in the techniques of printing. What, to the average editor, was once merely a medium of communication, has developed over the years into an art that commands the respect both of scholars and of readers who are looking for entertainment. Doubtless influenced by such national periodicals as *Life*, historical editors have turned to pictures to help tell their stories, and they have substituted magazine format with its larger page size, double columns, and skillful use of white space for the book format of the earlier journals.

The process of change has been gradual. The quarterly I edit went through a long series of minor transformations before adopting its present illustrated format in 1952. Its cover alone was redesigned no fewer than seven times between 1915 and 1948, and the page design also was subjected to various improvements. The modest *Bulletin* inaugurated by Dr. Buck was improved steadily until its typography received national recognition in 1950, when an issue was selected for the first magazine show held under the auspices of the American Institute of Graphic Arts. From 562 entries submitted, the Minnesota magazine was among seventy-one chosen for this national display, and it was one of six scholarly and intellectual journals that received certificates of excellence for their designs. Only one other state historical quarterly — the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* — was included in that small group. Those responsible for the Minnesota journal feel that the changes in its format represent an evolutionary process beneficial alike to the magazine, its authors, and its readers.

The use of pictorial sources was not new when Minnesota switched to its present illustrated design. The very first issue of the *Wisconsin Maga-*

zine of History displayed some portraits of authors; inserted illustrations on contrasting stock had long been used by quarterlies that employed the book format. From its very first issue, published in 1949, *American Heritage* had been pointing the way for state periodicals interested in exploiting a visual approach. Editors were at last beginning to realize that as a research tool, pictures supplement printed and manuscript records; that they can be interpreted by each individual reader, be he scholar or schoolboy; and that as a source they cannot be surpassed for truthfulness and accuracy. In employing such materials, researchers, authors, and editors have merely scratched the surface. Only token use, for example, has been made of well over half a million paintings, prints, photographs, and other visual records of Minnesota scenes and people of yesterday and today in the Minnesota Historical Society's picture collection. With simplified methods, the cost of reproducing pictorial material — both black and white and colored — is rapidly dwindling, putting lavish illustration within the reach of many an editor with a limited budget. A good example of its usefulness in exploiting a sidelight on local history that could not have been handled adequately in words alone is a section on log cabin construction by a professional photographer in the June, 1960, issue of *Minnesota History*.

What effect — if any — have changing content and format had on the circulation of state historical quarterlies and the membership rolls of the societies which publish them?

One of the most elaborately illustrated state journals — *Montana* — though only ten years old, can boast a circulation of 15,000. The State Historical Society of Missouri, on the other hand, serves a membership of more than 11,000, though its *Review* is one of the most conservative issued in the Midwest. The more progressive *Bulletin* of the Missouri Historical Society at St. Louis has a circulation of 4,300. The quarterly IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS has about 6,500 readers, and its popular monthly *Palimpsest* is normally issued in an edition of about 7,500 copies. The Louisiana Historical Association, though seventy years old, established a new quarterly last January with about 700 subscribers. Another newcomer among state periodicals is *Idaho Yesterdays*; it is now in its fourth volume with a circulation of 563. Michigan and Ohio distribute about 1,500 copies of their quarterlies; circulation figures for Nebraska, Oregon, Wisconsin, and Minnesota run between 2,500 and slightly over 3,000. It might be worth noting that the Minnesota Historical Society had 347 mem-

bers when its quarterly was established in 1915, and that its circulation has increased almost ninefold.

What of the future? No one can know with certainty what it will bring. But the temptation to make a few suggestions — and predictions — is too great to resist. Personally, I feel that the illustrated magazine format is here to stay for a long, long time, and that it will continue to gain recruits in states that still employ book formats. I believe that as the cost of color reproduction drops, more and more periodicals of small circulation will use it. I doubt that any of our state historical journals will run out of copy relating to their own areas in the foreseeable future. The collecting programs of our manuscripts curators alone will long continue to furnish material for graduate students and others who have the time and energy to exploit new themes or re-examine old ones.

Before closing I want to suggest that historical organizations — national, state, and local — throughout the country share today a common need for editors — a need that can be filled only by way of a highly specialized training course. Such a course would go far beyond the schools of journalism and the departments of history and rhetoric and English and American Studies that we now comb hopefully when looking for qualified personnel. Few who have not been involved in historical publications work have any conception of the varied talents and skills it demands. We are expected to be historians — accuracy is our watchword, and we must know how to bolster our facts with footnotes. We must be bibliographers of sorts, familiar with the sources, published and unpublished. We must be aware not only of past publications relating to our special area, but we must know what projects are under way, what is new, and what needs to be done in the future. We must be able not only to find qualified authors and to judge the products of their research and their pens, but we must exhibit the talents of the diplomat in dealing with them. All of us, I am sure, have encountered enraged authors who objected to any tampering with their prose, to say nothing of questioning their so-called facts. Few of us, perhaps, have been placed in the position of the editor of the *London Times* who once received a letter from George Bernard Shaw demanding the immediate discharge of a "busybody" on the newspaper staff because he devoted a "lot of his time to chasing split infinitives." "It is of no consequence," wrote Shaw, "whether he decides to go quickly — or quickly to go — or to quickly go. The important thing is that he should go at once."

Fortunately, few contributors to historical quarterlies are in a position to make such drastic demands, though I'm sure I could name some who would take delight in following Shaw's example by asking my director to dispense with my services.

Returning to the historical editor's qualifications — we must be alert "word-watchers," to borrow a term from a recent article on English usage. And we must keep abreast of the latest developments in typography, know type faces, be familiar with pictorial resources in our special areas, understand methods of illustrative reproduction, and discover printers and engravers whose prices will enable us to stay within limited budgets.

Right here is where the American Association for State and Local History could lend a helping hand. Would it be outside the functions of the association to establish a training course for editors? Rather than a graduate course in some university department of history or journalism, I have in mind an arrangement whereby the expenses of promising prospects would be paid while they worked and received training under successful editors of long experience. Perhaps the association could perform no greater service for the nation's historical organizations.

In conclusion, I want to quote a remark penned by Cyril Connolly, editor of a British periodical called *Horizon* during the trying years of World War II. "Editing a magazine is a form of the good life," he wrote. "It is creating when the world is destroying — being given once a month the opportunity to produce a perfect number and every month failing, and just when despair sets in, being presented with one more chance." It is this conviction that keeps us going when we find a "typo" in a vital spot, when an author complains that his deathless prose has been wrecked, when the printer distorts a layout that we had believed foolproof. To sustain you in your future endeavors, I leave you with Mr. Connolly's thought.