

THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. XLIV

ISSUED IN AUGUST 1963

No. 8

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Historical Magazines in Iowa

When the capital of Iowa was moved to Des Moines in 1857, the State University and the State Historical Society were left behind in Iowa City. The Society had been organized early in that year, electing Governor James W. Grimes as its first president.

But it was not until the mid-year of 1863 that the State Historical Society ventured upon the publication of a quarterly journal, which it called *Annals of Iowa*, one of the earliest historical quarterlies in the United States. Though edited in Iowa City by the successive secretaries of the Society, it was published (except in its first and third years) at Davenport. Years later, Charles Aldrich, who was generally inclined to be critical of the Historical Society, wrote of the First Series of the *Annals*: "This was a quarterly magazine of distinguished merit, and within its pages may be found more facts relating to early Iowa than can now be gleaned from all other existing sources." This sweeping statement needs some qualifying,

but it is true that many articles by early Iowa leaders telling of events of which they were a part make this First Series invaluable. Notable serial articles were Charles Negus' "Early History of Iowa" and Samuel Prentis Curtis' "Army of the Southwest." The Rev. Samuel Storrs Howe edited the first two volumes; and he was succeeded by that extraordinary figure of Iowa's early years, Theodore S. Parvin — lawyer, politician, scientist, historian, founder (in Cedar Rapids) of the greatest of Masonic libraries. As secretary of the State Historical Society, he was editor of the *Annals* in 1864-65 and thereafter a leading contributor. He was followed in the editorship by two doctors, Frederick Lloyd and Stanford W. Huff.

The First Series of the *Annals* ended with the twelfth volume in 1874. Its average circulation throughout its twelve years was probably under 500, at a dollar a year. It varied from 80 to 128 pages from quarter to quarter, and each number had an engraved portrait for frontispiece. But the Historical Society was having a hard time — its small membership, its reliance on volunteer help, inadequate appropriations made worse by the Panic of 1873, and the seemingly never-ending problem of the need for more library space.

Nevertheless, a New Series of the *Annals* was published, somewhat irregularly, in Iowa City, 1882-1884. Chief editor was S. S. Howe and Judge A. R. Fulton was an assistant.

After Howe's series of the *Annals* was discontinued, the Society founded the *Iowa Historical Record*, edited by its secretaries, beginning with H. W. Davis and published in Iowa City in 18 volumes. Each volume consisted of four quarterly numbers of 48 octavo pages each, and the subscription price was a dollar a year. The engraved portraits used as frontispieces were beautifully executed; in a few of the earlier numbers actual photographic prints were used instead of the engravings. Separate numbers have long been collectors' items, fetching high prices.

The *Iowa Historical Record* (1885-1902) is notable for its biographical articles about early Iowans, its personal memoirs, and its publication of letters written by pioneers and by soldiers during the Civil War. Its contents had more variety than the journals of most other state historical societies. Verse was not infrequent, and much of the writing was exceptionally good. Many distinguished names appear among the contributors — Professors T. S. Parvin and Samuel Calvin; William Salter, famous Burlington Congregational minister, lecturer, and biographer; John P. Irish, Iowa City journalist, politician, and orator; James F. Wilson, Fairfield lawyer, who had enjoyed a long and distinguished career in both houses of Congress; Franc B. Wilkie, who followed newspaper experiences in Davenport and Dubuque with a more spectacular career on the *Chicago*

Times; and John Springer, Iowa City editor, politician, and master printer, who may have had something to do with the pleasing typographical design of the *Record*.

In 1903 the Historical Society closed the file of the *Iowa Historical Record* and set up in its place a new quarterly of historical scholarship entitled *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*. This was primarily the project of Dr. Benjamin F. Shambaugh, a member of the State Historical Society's Board of Curators who four years later was to become Superintendent and Editor of the Society. The *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* was a well printed large octavo of a hundred pages or more containing in each number several studies, usually by State University of Iowa scholars, in the field designated by the periodical's title, together with notes on a wide field of current historical publication in the United States and news of historical activities in Iowa.

Shambaugh was *de facto* editor of the *Iowa Journal* until his death in 1940; but he was assisted by such able associates as Dan Elbert Clark, John Carl Parish, Bruce E. Mahan, and Ruth A. Gallaher. Dr. John Ely Briggs followed Shambaugh as Editor of the *Iowa Journal*, with Dr. Gallaher as Associate Editor. Dr. William J. Petersen became Superintendent of the Society in 1947 and Editor of the *Journal* in 1948. The new editor dropped the "*and Politics*" from the title, adopted a brand

new type, improved the cover through the use of pictures, and made the contents more readable through maps, pictures and charts. Dr. Mildred E. Throne served as Associate Editor of the quarterly from 1948 until her death in June, 1960. After personally getting out three issues of the Quarterly, Superintendent Petersen was forced to temporarily suspend publication after April, 1961, pending the replacement of Dr. Throne.

Meantime a Third Series of the *Annals of Iowa* had been begun in Des Moines, after that title had been dormant for nine years. The originator of this venture was Charles Aldrich, who had edited newspapers in Webster City, Dubuque, and Marshalltown. Aldrich was a born collector, and he was especially interested in books, autographs and documents. Eventually he not only gave his collections to the State Library (then housed in the Capitol) but persuaded the Legislature to establish a State Department of History in 1892 and seven years later to begin erection of a building across the street from the Capitol for the Library and the collections of the Department.

The Third Series of the *Annals* was founded the year after the Department (later called the State Historical, Memorial and Art Department) was formally authorized, with Aldrich as its curator. Aldrich was editor of the *Annals* until his death in 1908. He was succeeded by Edgar R. Harlan, 1909-1937; O. E. Klingaman, 1937-1940;

Ora Williams, 1941-1947; Claude R. Cooke, 1947-1957; Fleming Fraker, Jr., 1958-1961; and Suzanne Beisel, 1962-. Some of the early leading contributors included Cyrus C. Carpenter, Benjamin F. Gue, William Salter, Cyrenus Cole, and Samuel Calvin. Moses M. Ham's "Julien Dubuque" (March, 1896) is still one of the best short studies of that pioneer figure. After the 1915 volume was completed, Curator Harlan regretfully suspended publication. He was himself overburdened with work, especially in connection with his duties as a member of the Board of Conservation, and he had nobody on his staff to whom he could turn for the specialized task of editing the *Annals*.

In 1919 Harlan obtained the services of David C. Mott, who had conducted newspapers in What Cheer, Tipton, Audubon, and Marengo, to act as working editor of the *Annals* under the Curator's direction. The journal was resumed with the number for April, 1920, and Mott edited it through April, 1937. His chief contributions were the useful compilations, "Early Iowa Newspapers," which occupied the entire issue of January, 1928; and "Abandoned Towns, Villages and Post Offices in Iowa," published serially in 1931; as well as the records of the meetings of the Pioneer Lawmakers' Association, of which Mott was a member and secretary 1921-1937; and the "Notable Deaths" department, which often involved extensive research. This department is an *Annals* fea-

ture that has furnished for nearly 70 years an incomparable Iowa necrology. Mott wrote 1,242 of these sketches during his 17-years tenure.

The Third Series of the *Annals* has been from the first a modest quarterly of some 80 pages, with a few illustrations in each number. In early issues there were some engravings on steel but these soon gave way to the cheaper but excellent halftones made available to magazines by the mid-nineties.

One has to admit that it is true — alack! and alas! — that despite the generally high quality of the journals thus far described, some of their articles were overweighted with factual material quite without graces of style, and some were downright dull. But in July, 1920, the State Historical Society of Iowa issued something new among periodicals sponsored by the many state and regional historical associations in America. The *Palimpsest* was attractive from the first glance, well designed typographically, easy on the eyes, readable. It did not neglect the historian's stern duty to tell the truth on the basis of all the facts available; but it strove to present its facts with some emphasis here and there upon the dramatic, the curious, and the amusing elements of its stories, and with attention to freshness and variety in writing style.

Dr. Shambaugh, who conceived the idea of this magazine, said in its first issue: "Let us write the history of the Commonwealth of Iowa as we would write romance — with life, action, and

color — that the story of this land and its people may live.”

The first *Palimpsest* page was slightly smaller than that of the magazine the reader presently holds in his hands. The cover was a light brown, with the title and table of contents imprinted in red and black over a dim background reproduction of an ancient parchment palimpsest. Three or four short articles were usually carried in the monthly's 32 pages, with an occasional picture or map. The circulation reached 1,650 at the time of Dr. Shambaugh's death. The magazine was free to the members of the State Historical Society of Iowa.

For its first two years John C. Parish was editor of the *Palimpsest*. Biographer and novelist, Parish was himself an industrious writer for his magazine during his tenure, and he set an example of literary discrimination for his successors. When Parish left to join the faculty of the University of California at Los Angeles, Shambaugh appointed John Ely Briggs as editor of the *Palimpsest*. It was a happy choice. Briggs was a gentleman and a scholar. His editorial commentary at the ends of most numbers were never perfunctory; they were informative and sometimes unobtrusively philosophical. He contributed 54 articles of his own to the magazine during his editorship of 23 years.

Ruth A. Gallaher, who had been working editor of the Society's quarterly, the *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, for 15 years, took the helm of

the monthly when Briggs gave it up in 1945. She retired from the Society's staff three years later, however, after 30 years of faithful and competent work. Dr. William John Petersen, who had been made Superintendent of the Society the year before (1947) then assumed the arduous duties of the editorship of the *Palimpsest*.

"Steamboat Bill," as his friends affectionately call him, because of his special field of interest in river traffic and his book *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi*, had been Lecturer in Iowa history on the University faculty and Research Associate of the Society. He had been the leading contributor to *The Palimpsest* since joining the staff in 1930. His dynamism, his development of fresh ideas, and his promotional ability resulted in a seven fold increase in the Society's membership. This increase can be attributed in part to a greatly improved *Palimpsest*. One factor was the policy of devoting one issue to a single topic — Prehistoric Man, Lewis and Clark, Mormon Trails in Iowa, Herbert Hoover, Chautauqua, The Spirit Lake Massacre — to mention a few. Another factor was the lavish use of pictures; Petersen has issued several numbers each with more pictures than appeared in the first ten volumes—114 issues. In April, 1960, he added color to the cover and followed this with several pages of color in the inside whenever pictures were available. From a fairly static circulation of 1,500 *The Palimpsest* now

never prints less than 10,000, and frequently 15,000, 20,000, and 25,000 copies. Two issues — Amana and Sheaffer Pen — actually have reached 50,000 and 54,000 respectively.

Civil War History is a handsome 100-page octavo that began publication December, 1955, under the imprint of the State University of Iowa. Its founder and first editor (1955-1959) was Clyde C. Walton, librarian and archivist. It was filled with memoirs, letters from soldiers, some verse originating during those war-torn years, notes and queries, and book reviews. It has been national in scope in respect to its Advisory Board, its authors, and materials. Walton left Iowa to become Secretary of the Illinois Historical Society in 1956 and after a few years gave up the editorship of the University-published quarterly to James I. Robertson, Jr. (1960-1962), who in turn resigned to become executive director of the Civil War Centennial Commission in Washington. He was succeeded by Robert Dykstra. This quarterly has been, in some sense, an organ, or at least a spokesman, for the national Commission.

The *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, one of the three great journals of history in the nation, was, in a technical sense, published in Iowa for nearly half a century. Dr. Benjamin F. Shambaugh, who was Editor of the first seven volumes of the *Proceedings of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association* (1907-1914), and was on the

first Board of Editors when it began the *Review* in 1914, was probably influential in placing its production in the hands of the Torch Press, a high-grade Cedar Rapids house, where it remained until 1962. Dr. Louis Pelzer, professor of history at the University and a former research associate of the State Historical Society, was managing editor of the *Review* 1941-1946.

In Dubuque the *Iowa Catholic Historical Review* was published in four numbers (each one called a "volume") in the early thirties, as follows: I, January, 1930; II, November, 1930; III, October, 1931; and IV, April, 1932. A modest octavo, it printed histories of various Catholic establishments in Iowa, obituaries, and notes. Its editor was M. M. Hoffmann.

Finally, back in 1872-1873, in Des Moines, someone issued the *Western Life-Boat*, later called the *Western Life-Boat and Journal of Biography, History and Geography*. It was a 48-page octavo, and described itself in an early number as "the only journal of biography in the United States, and far preferable for family reading to the sickly sentimentality of ordinary magazine literature." Its picturesque punning title was apparently of no great help to its fortunes, and the *Life-Boat* capsized in the heavy seas caused by the financial panic of 1873.

Upon this note of anticlimax we conclude our survey of Iowa historical magazines.