

THE PALIMPSEST In Retrospect

In July of 1920 Dr. Benjamin F. Shambaugh, Superintendent of the State Historical Society of Iowa, sent "A Personal Letter" to members of the Society announcing the publication of a monthly magazine to be entitled THE PALIMPSEST. The primary purpose of the new monthly was to be the "popularization and more general dissemination" of Iowa history in a form that was "attractive" and in a style that was "popular in the best sense — to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished." Dr. Shambaugh pointed out, however, that readers were not to infer that articles in THE PALIMPSEST were any the less "real history" because the subject-matter which they contain was "presented in a style that is more popular and less monographic."

A great deal of thought was given to the naming of the new magazine. Dr. Shambaugh declared:

The name of this new monthly magazine of history — THE PALIMPSEST, pronounced with the accent on the first syllable, Pal' imp-sest — will at first seem strange and unfamiliar. Indeed, in choosing a name a very deliberate effort was made to avoid the stereotyped or anything in common use and to select a title that would be recognized at once as something new and distinctive in the field of historical publication.

The name PALIMPSEST was chosen because it seemed to furnish a title that is both distinctive and full of meaning that harmonizes with the character of the publication to which it is applied. Thus palimpsests in early times were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to read and translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts. (Note the suggestion of an ancient palimpsest in the cover design of the new monthly.)

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

Fifty-seven years ago The State Historical Society was the pioneer in the publication of a *quarterly* magazine devoted to State and local history — *The Annals of Iowa* being the first periodical of its kind in the United States. In the same spirit of pioneering the Society now ventures to bring out a *monthly* magazine devoted to State and local history.

In concluding his letter Dr. Shambaugh hoped that members would offer "opinions, suggestions, and criticisms" of this new historical venture. The Iowa press was not slow in responding. The *Des Moines Register* of August 8, 1920, declared the first number of this "unique magazine" was both "readable and artistic" and its career would be "watched with interest by all who know the publi-

cations of the State Historical Society." The Des Moines *Capital*, after explaining the significance of the word Palimpsest, concluded "after we get used to the name, Palimpsest, we shall like it. . . . The State Historical Society is conferring a great obligation upon the people of Iowa by collecting and publishing chapters of our state's early history and settlement."

The new magazine was not overlooked by staid professional publications. In April, 1921, the *American Historical Review* declared that the new magazine was "written in a style which will no doubt draw to the Palimpsest many readers for whom the more sober historical articles have no appeal."

As the years passed THE PALIMPSEST continued to attract favorable comment. In 1927 the Iowa City *Daily Iowan* declared the little magazine had grown "more interesting and useful with each issue." The editor of the *New York Times* asserted on July 29, 1928, that the "appropriately" named PALIMPSEST presented a "continual source of unhackneyed and various inquiry into the whole life of the State." The Dubuque *Daily American Tribune* was convinced THE PALIMPSEST contributed much to Iowa history and culture. "We often reflect that of all our Iowa institutions the State Historical Society is quite possibly doing the most to build into the state consciousness that kind of self-respect that Iowans need. . . . Do you

read the Palimpsest? It is the delightful little magazine that popularizes bits of Iowa history and sets them before the average reader each month so that he may feel familiar with them."

On February 21, 1931, as the magazine entered its twelfth year, the editor of the Mason City *Globe-Gazette* declared:

I doubt if there is published anywhere a more thoroughly enjoyable magazine for persons possessed of an interest in history than the Palimpsest. . . . Month after month the writers in this remarkable little magazine deal with interesting bits of Iowa history, some of it pioneer and some of it more nearly contemporary. . . . In conception and in execution the little magazine is worthy of the state historical society and I commend it to all who wish to invest each year a dollar in a sure dividend payer.

Up to 1948 THE PALIMPSEST used only occasional pictures and maps, but in 1950 the format was changed by the addition of pictures of historical significance. The result was even greater popularity with Iowans. Thus, in 1936 the Society had printed 2,600 copies of Bertha M. H. Shambaugh's *Amana — In Transition*. Two hundred copies remained in 1950 when Dr. Petersen determined to pictorialize the identical 1936 *Amana* text. The results were electrifying! An edition of 10,000 copies was sold in six weeks. A second edition of 5,000 was sold in six months; a third of 10,000 copies exhausted in a year; and a fourth of 25,000 copies nearly depleted by 1965.

Other issues have been equally popular, ranging from 15,000 to 25,000, while one issue actually totalled 54,000 copies. When it is remembered that the monthly printings of THE PALIMPSEST for thirty years barely averaged 2,000 copies, the magnitude of these printings becomes apparent.

The popularity of THE PALIMPSEST was not limited to members of the Society. A new and wider body of readers was being exploited in Iowa schools, where institutional school memberships increased from 30 to over 400 between 1949 and 1965. It was soon apparent that teachers and students alike profited from their reading of THE PALIMPSEST. Thus, in the spring of 1950, Mrs. Bernice Black, an instructor in the Webster City Junior College, took a poll on the popularity of twenty magazines studied by her freshmen students. Included in the survey were the *American Mercury*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Christian Century*, *Commonweal*, *Congressional Digest*, *Current History*, *Fortune*, *Forum*, *Harper's*, *Life*, *Look*, *Nation*, *New York Times Magazine*, *New Yorker*, THE PALIMPSEST, *Saturday Review of Literature*, *Survey*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Scientific American*, and *Theatre Arts*. Although pitted against such outstanding magazines, THE PALIMPSEST ranked third in popularity. The students commented that THE PALIMPSEST touched subjects "dear to the hearts of Iowans." They also liked the magazine because its articles "tie the past to the present."

The change in format was approved by the students who hoped that the policy would be to continue the publication in its "present attractive design."

During its forty-five years THE PALIMPSEST has had four editors — John Carl Parish, John Ely Briggs, Ruth A. Gallaher, and William J. Petersen. In addition to editing the little magazine, each of these contributed many articles to it.

John Carl Parish, the first editor, was born in Des Moines and did his college work at Iowa State Normal School and the State University of Iowa, receiving his Ph.D. from the University in 1908. Dr. Parish served as assistant editor for the State Historical Society between 1907 and 1910, during which period he wrote three biographies — *Robert Lucas* (1907), *John Chambers* (1909), and *George Wallace Jones* (1912). Parish also edited *The Robert Lucas Journal of the War of 1812* and the *Autobiography of John Chambers*. One historical novel, *The Man with the Iron Hand*, appeared under his name in 1913.

After teaching at Colorado College from 1914 to 1917, and serving in World War I, Parish returned to the Society as associate editor and as lecturer in Iowa history in the University. His writing skill made him a logical choice to become the first editor of THE PALIMPSEST. He held this position from July, 1920, to August, 1922, inclusive, when he accepted a position on the history

staff of the University of California at Los Angeles, where he continued until his death in 1939.

The editorial style evolved under John Carl Parish during the first twenty-six issues of THE PALIMPSEST, was carried on by his successor, John Ely Briggs. Born on a farm near Washburn in 1890, young Briggs early evinced editorial skill when he served as editor of the Eagle Grove high school annual and the Morningside College annual. After his graduation from Morningside in 1913, Briggs received his M.A. from the University of Iowa in 1914 and his Ph.D. from the same institution in 1916. In 1914 Dr. Shambaugh appointed him research assistant in the State Historical Society, promoting him to research associate in 1917. The Society printed his *History of Social Legislation in Iowa* in 1915 and his biography of *William Peters Hepburn* in 1919.

Meanwhile, in 1917, Briggs became assistant professor of political science at the State University of Iowa from which rank he rose steadily to a full professorship in 1937. He continued to be identified with the State Historical Society, succeeding Parish as editor of THE PALIMPSEST in September, 1922, and continuing in this post through September, 1945, editing 277 issues of THE PALIMPSEST during this period. In addition, Dr. Briggs wrote 54 articles and 184 sparkling philosophical comments that were always a delight to readers of THE PALIMPSEST.

When John Ely Briggs resigned as editor of THE PALIMPSEST in September, 1945, he was succeeded by Dr. Ruth A. Gallaher, who had joined the Society staff as library assistant in 1915 and had made frequent contributions to both THE PALIMPSEST and the *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, before becoming editor of the quarterly in July, 1930. Born in Warren, Illinois, in 1882, Miss Gallaher taught school in Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Idaho, before becoming a graduate assistant and part time employee of the Society while working on her doctorate which she received from the University of Iowa in 1918. Between 1918 and 1930, Dr. Gallaher was library associate and made frequent contributions to the Society's publications, including one book—*Legal and Political Status of Women in Iowa* (1918). Dr. Gallaher continued as editor of THE PALIMPSEST until July, 1948, when she retired after thirty years of service for the Society.

In August, 1948, Dr. William J. Petersen became the fourth editor of THE PALIMPSEST. Born in Dubuque in 1901, Petersen received his B.A. from the University of Dubuque in 1926, his M.A. from the University of Iowa in 1927, and his Ph.D. from the same institution in 1930. He was appointed research associate with the State Historical Society and lecturer in Iowa history in the University. During the next seventeen years he contributed over one hundred articles to THE

PALIMPSEST and many monographs to the Society's quarterly. In addition, he wrote *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi* (1937), *Iowa: The Rivers of Her Valleys* (1941), and *A Reference Guide to Iowa History* (1942). In July, 1947, Dr. Petersen was appointed Superintendent of the State Historical Society and thirteen months later assumed the editorship of THE PALIMPSEST. He continued a frequent contributor to both the monthly and the quarterly, wrote a two-volume history — *The Story of Iowa*, and published widely in other historical magazines. When THE PALIMPSEST was pictorialized in 1950 the initial volume contained more pictures than did the first twenty volumes.

The following box score reveals the contributions of the four editors to THE PALIMPSEST.

	Editorial Years	Issues Edited	Articles Contributed	Editorial Comments
John C. Parish	1920-1922	26	16	26
John E. Briggs	1922-1945	277	54	184
Ruth A. Gallaher	1945-1948	34	51	13
Wm. J. Petersen	1948-1965	203	304	2

The June, 1965 issue marks the end of 45 years of publication for THE PALIMPSEST. During these forty-five years THE PALIMPSEST has appeared regularly each month, touching on all phases of Iowa history. A total of 366 different authors has

contributed 1,988 articles about which the editors from time to time have written 227 comments. The leading contributors over the past forty-five years with the number of articles they have contributed are presented herewith.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Articles</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Articles</i>
Petersen, W. J.	304	May, George	22
Swisher, Jacob A.	125	Gingerich, Melvin	20
Donovan, Frank	77	Keyes, Charles R.	20
Mahan, Bruce E.	66	Mott, Frank L.	20
Briggs, John E.	60	Jordan, Philip D.	18
Gallaher, Ruth A.	58	Parish, John C.	17
Wilson, Ben Hur	57	Haefner, Marie E.	16
Nye, Frank T.	52	Grahame, Pauline	15
Throne, Mildred	30	Ross, Earle D.	15
Johnson, Jack T.	29	Robeson, George F.	14
Kuhns, Fred I.	27	Richman, Irving B.	13
Wright, Luella M.	27	Bergman, Leola N.	11
Shambaugh, Benj. F.	25	Lyon, Bessie	10
Calkin, Homer L.	22	Hoffmann, M. M.	10
Frederick, John T.	22	Pownall, Dorothy A.	10
Rutland, Robert	22		

Most of the above contributors were either full-time or part-time employees of the Society. Dr. Jacob A. Swisher was a regular contributor to both the monthly and quarterly while serving as research associate of the Society between 1922 and 1950. Dr. Bruce E. Mahan wrote most of his articles while associate editor of the *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*. Ben Hur Wilson compiled his unusual record while a high school teach-

er at Joliet. Jack T. Johnson was a part-time employee while Frederick Kuhns, Robert Rutland and George May were full-time employees. Since 1950 the railroad articles of Frank Donovan and the reports of Frank Nye on the General Assembly have been both popular and useful.

Other outstanding Iowans have contributed one or more articles including such men as Johnson Brigham, J. Brownlee Davidson, Virgil Hancher, Harry Hansen, Marcus L. Hansen, W. Earl Hall, Herbert Hoover, Frank Luther Mott, Louis Pelzer, M. M. Quaife, Irving B. Richman, Earle D. Ross, Carl E. Seashore, Sam B. Sloan and Henry A. Wallace. On the opposite page are the names of 366 contributors to *THE PALIMPSEST* during its forty-five year history.

The material covered during these forty-five years embraces 22,981 pages of accurate, readable, and significant historical material. It includes during the past decade alone 3,461 individual pictures and 121 maps. Fully 188 colored pictures have been printed since color was introduced in 1960. All this has served as grist for editors, magazine writers, radio and television commentators, and school and study club programs. In the years ahead *THE PALIMPSEST* will continue to explore the varied facets of Iowa history and present them accurately and colorfully to its ever-increasing family of readers.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN