

## The Centennial Building

Although the question of finding a permanent home for the Society had confronted the Board of Curators on a half dozen occasions since 1867, it was not until 1954 that the first real effort was made to interest both the General Assembly and the people of Iowa in such a dream. In June of 1954 the State University, itself badly cramped for space, suggested that the Society might like to use the Peter A. Dey home on North Clinton for its offices in exchange for the rooms it occupied in Schaeffer Hall. To house the Society's library, the University would endeavor to secure \$200,000 from the General Assembly to build a book storage place on the Dey property.

Investigation proved that structurally the Dey home was unsuitable for offices and that a library inaccessible for research would prevent the Society from performing its prescribed services to the people of Iowa. Since the Society was already hampered in the collection of material because of lack of space, the Board of Curators proposed that the Society would undertake to raise \$100,000 on its own and ask the General Assembly to match this sum with \$200,000 for their new home. Such action seemed especially appropriate because

of the approaching centennial of the institution. The new home, by unanimous agreement, would be called the Centennial Building.

Professional solicitors, it was found upon inquiry, were unwilling to solicit funds, even at three and four times the amount usually charged for hospital or church fund-raising campaigns. The Curators thereupon appointed the superintendent of the Society to secure the \$100,000.

1955

Those were anxious days for the Superintendent as he solicited legislative support in Des Moines. Fortunately, there had been a steadily increasing interest in the Society among the legislators, resulting in an 800% increase in membership since 1947 within their group. Such men as Fred Schwengel, Clark McNeal, Bill Tate, Bill Lynes, Wendell Pendleton, Jack Schroeder, and De Vere Watson, had been especially active in promoting this phenomenal membership growth.

In the closing days of the session the 56th General Assembly passed its Appropriation Bill which included acceptance of the offer to match the \$100,000 raised by the Society with a \$200,000 legislative appropriation for a new Centennial Building. Senator D. C. Nolan and Representative Scott Swisher of Johnson County played leading roles in securing the appropriation.

Seventeen Senators had placed their names on

Senate File 191 and twenty-six House members had signed their names to House File 248, the original bills asking for the \$200,000 appropriation. The names of these men deserve to be recorded in the history of the Society.

## Senate File 191

Anderson Molison  
Boothby Nolan  
Dewel O'Malley  
Elijah Schroeder  
Grimstead Van Eaton  
Lucas Walker  
McFarlane D. Watson  
McManus H. Watson  
Weiss

## House File 248

Buck Kosek Sar  
Burtch Loss Smith  
Colburn McNeal Swisher  
Darrington Mensing Tate  
Falvey E. A. Miller Vermeer  
Frommelt Mooty J. F. Walter  
Hendrix Novak P. M. Walter  
Hoth Peterson Voigtmann  
Hultman Pim

Few legislatures had been faced with more difficult problems than the 56th General Assembly. On the one hand, the members were confronted with a large section of their constituents who favored "holding the line" and opposed raising taxes in any form. On the other hand, an equally vocal number of their constituents cried out for better roads, greater aid to schools, and more support for institutions under the Board of Education and the Board of Control. With such giant appropriations to be determined it took wisdom, courage, and leadership to see that the modest request of the Society was not shunted aside. The 56th General Assembly was well represented with men possessing these qualities and accordingly met the challenge to the delight of almost five

thousand members of the State Historical Society.

On December 8, 1955, the Board of Regents transferred to the State Historical Society of Iowa the 80 x 150-foot lot at the corner of Iowa Avenue and Gilbert Street on which were three University buildings. Two large frame houses used by University music students stood on the front of this lot facing Iowa Avenue. The University laundry was located on the rear of the lot facing Gilbert Street.

### 1956

The year 1955 had been a highly productive one for the State Historical Society. The General Assembly had voted \$200,000 for a Centennial Building in May and the Board of Regents had transferred an 80 x 150-foot lot to the Society in December. It only remained for the Society to raise its \$100,000. Throughout 1956 interest in the Society mounted on an ever-increasing crescendo. Steamboat trips on both the Mississippi and Missouri rivers helped focus attention on the Society's varied activities. Publications (including the William Boyd Allison book) became increasingly popular. Membership continued to grow at an amazing rate. All these forces combined to stimulate interest in the proposed Centennial Building. Before the year 1956 had come to an end the building fund had reached the \$100,000 cash available and entitled the Society

to the \$200,000 appropriated by the General Assembly. Among the first and largest contributors were the following:

Frank C. Allen	\$ 6,000	\$500
Sheaffer Pen Co.	5,000	Des Moines
Maytag Company	5,000	Yunker Bros., Inc.
Lee Papers & Families	5,250	Meredith Foundation
Hanford MacNider	5,000	Pioneer Hi-Bred Corn Co.
Dorothy Musser	5,000	James M. Pierce Corporation
Arthur Cox Family	2,250	Iowa City
	—————	James E. Stronks
	\$33,500	Sam T. Morrison
Carl Weeks	1,000	Plumbers Supply
Mrs. Mina J. Way	1,000	Iowa City <i>Press-Citizen</i>
Cedar Rapids <i>Gazette</i>	1,000	Frank J. Zeithamel
Waterloo <i>Courier</i>	1,000	Iowa State Bank & Trust
Dubuque		Frank L. Thompson
Carr, Adams & Collier	1,000	L. C. W. Clearman
Wahlert Foundation	1,000	Richard K. Adams
Keokuk		First National Bank
Hubinger Foundation	1,000	—————
Keokuk Electro-		F. O. Block, Bettendorf
Metals	1,000	O. D. Collis, Clinton
Hoerner Foundation	1,000	Taft Unitarian Foundation
	—————	Charles Gilchrist, Davenport
	9,000	W. A. Logan, Keokuk
22 \$500 contributions	11,000	Kent-Stein Foundation,
	—————	Muscatine
Total large contribu-		Burlington <i>Hawk-Eye Gazette</i>
tions in 1956	\$53,500	Ralph C. McCague,
		Marshalltown

Hundreds of other contributions, ranging from one dollar to \$300 helped swell the total to the \$100,000 mark by the time the 57th General Assembly convened in Des Moines in 1957.

1957

On April 9, 1957, bids were opened for the re-

moval of the two frame houses but the laundry was still in use pending the completion of its new building. Meanwhile, the centennial of the State Historical Society of Iowa had been observed at a commemorative dinner in the Iowa Memorial Union at Iowa City on February 7, 1957. It was attended by more than 120 members and guests, including eighteen Curators, thirteen of whom were serving on the Board at the time. Congratulations poured in from heads of sister institutions all over the United States. Curator William R. Hart served as Master of Ceremonies and Superintendent William J. Petersen gave the address of the evening.

Dean Allin W. Dakin brought greetings from President Virgil M. Hancher on the occasion of the centennial and felicitously extended his own personal good wishes. Curator W. Howard Smith introduced the nine elected Curators, present and past, while Curator Margaret Hinderman presented the seven appointed Curators, present and past, many of whom had traveled long distances to be present for the historic occasion. The lighting of the huge Birthday Cake was a happy feature of the dinner. Dr. J. A. Swisher, former Research Associate of the Society, read some original poems. The Superintendent presented an *Award of Merit* from the American Association for State and Local History to Philip Adler of Davenport in recognition of the outstanding ser-

vice of the Lee Papers in promoting state and local history over the years, and in substantially supporting the Microfilm Room of the Centennial Building. An Award of Merit was also given the State Historical Society for publishing the *William Boyd Allison* biography.

Perhaps the most fortuitous tribute came from Dr. Paul M. Angle, Director of the Chicago Historical Society, who in a series of one-page essays that had appeared in *Publishers' Weekly* over a period of several years, had paid special tribute to the State Historical Society of Iowa on February 4, 1957, by including the Society with twenty-three great institutions in his "Doorways to American Culture." Seven of these twenty-three institutions were state historical societies, who "through their publications, have made available a vast resource of national intellectual wealth." In his tribute to the Society Dr. Angle concluded:

*States older than Iowa may have larger historical literatures, but no state has had its past so thoroughly explored and so widely disseminated by its own historical society.*

It was announced at the Centennial Dinner that the Society had \$105,000 in cash on hand, not counting pledges. Rising building costs were a matter of genuine concern, however, and the superintendent pointed out that once the building

was completed additional funds would be needed for furnishings and equipment. He noted six gifts alone totaled \$31,250 and urged broader participation in the venture, particularly among the 700 Life Members.

On June 24, 1957, the Society held its Biennial meeting on the grounds of the Lucas Home in Iowa City. On this historic spot those attending looked back over the period of a century and noted the tremendous strides that had been taken. The membership stood at 5,250, publications were being issued regularly, the steamboat trips remained as popular as ever, and the Society had just conducted a record-breaking tour of the Amana Colonies for the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs. This group of women, with its membership of almost 35,000, was destined to contribute a total of over \$8,000 to the Centennial Building for an Iowa Women's Heritage Room. This proved to be the second largest cash contribution made to the Centennial Building.

1958

By January, 1958, the University laundry was transferred to its new building. On March 20 bids were opened for the demolition and removal of the old laundry within thirty days. One month later, on April 17, bids were opened for the construction of the Centennial Building. Over fifty bidders were present to listen to the figures quoted

by nine bidders for the General Contract, four bidders for the Mechanical Contract, four bidders for the Electric Wiring Contract, and six who sought the Service Elevator Contract. Architect Burdette Higgins, of the firm of Tinsley, Higgins, Lighter & Lyon of Des Moines, read the bids in the presence of the superintendent and five Curators — William R. Hart, James Nesmith, and James E. Stronks of Iowa City, John Mohl of Davenport, and Ransom McKee of Muscatine. The successful bidders were:

<i>Contract</i>	<i>Successful Bidder</i>	<i>Home Address</i>	<i>Amt. Bid</i>
General	Frantz Construction Co.	Iowa City	\$215,400
Mechanical	Darragh & Associates, Inc.	Cedar Rapids	98,850
Electric	The Home Appliances, Inc.	Iowa City	22,217
Elevator	R & O Elevator	Minneapolis	16,929
			\$353,396

Once the contracts were let, work began in earnest. On June 7, 1958, ground was broken by President Sam T. Morrison and a small group of Curators and friends, including Provost Harvey H. Davis of the University; Will J. Hayek, Treasurer of the Society; Mrs. Arthur J. Cox, Representative Scott Swisher, and former Senator LeRoy Mercer.

Once started, General Contractor Frantz fairly kept things humming. By October 16 the second floor and half the roof had been poured and bricklayers were busily engaged with their trowels. It was a bitter cold day on November 26 when a

score of hardy souls gathered to lay the cornerstone of the Centennial Building.

Fortunately the General Contractor, Mr. Frantz, had installed salamanders to take some of the chill off the interior of the building. The entire concrete superstructure had been in for some weeks and bricks were laid to the second floor. President Virgil M. Hancher, President Morrison, members of the Building Committee, and Curators William R. Hart, W. Howard Smith, James E. Stronks, Ransom McKee, and William Houlette were present at the laying of the cornerstone together with Representative Scott Swisher, LeRoy Mercer, Bruce E. Mahan, J. A. Swisher, and Frank Zeithamel.

The contents of the copper box inserted in the cornerstone included the following:

- A. Miscellaneous Records, Reports, and Data Published by the Society.
  1. Constitution and By-Laws of the State Historical Society.
  2. *Some Information* (January, 1942) — List of members, etc.
  3. *Some Information* (January, 1951) — Historical publications.
  4. Membership List by Counties and States (October, 1948).
  5. Membership List by Counties and States (January, 1952).
  6. Program for Centennial Birthday Dinner (February 7, 1957).

7. Society Steamboat Excursion (1951) — Menu of the *Rob Roy III*.
  8. *Looking Backward on Hawkeyeland*, by William J. Petersen.
  9. Biennial Reports of the State Historical Society of Iowa for the following: 1947-1949; 1951-1953; 1953-1955; 1955-1957.
- B. Representative Publications of the Society.
1. *News for Members* — October, 1954, through October, 1958.
  2. *The Palimpsest* — June, 1955; August, 1955; May, 1956; March, 1957; June, 1957.
  3. *Iowa Journal of History* — April, 1957.
  4. Books.
    - a. *A Glimpse of Iowa in 1846*, by J. B. Newhall (SHSI reprint).
    - b. *Iowa History Reference Guide* (1952), by Wm. J. Petersen.
    - c. *The Constitutions of Iowa* (1934), by Benj. F. Shambaugh.
- C. Contemporary Iowa Newspapers: *Iowa City Press-Citizen*; *Cedar Rapids Gazette*; *Des Moines Register*; *Davenport Times*; *Waterloo Courier*.

1959

As the Centennial Building neared completion excitement mounted among the Curators and friends of the Society. By mid-February the building was substantially finished on the outside, the rooms inside had been roughed in, a good deal of the electrical and plumbing equipment installed, the elevator ready to operate, and the plasterers awaiting warmer weather.

Meanwhile, the 58th General Assembly was rolling along under a full head of steam. Members of that august body were mindful of the Society's needs, for in February, 1959, both houses of the legislature approved a bill appropriating \$85,000 to furnish and equip the Centennial Building. It was truly a grand vote of confidence, a confidence resting on the fact that the Society had met its own challenge by raising substantially more than the \$100,000 promised in order to be eligible for the \$200,000 appropriated by the General Assembly in 1955. Legislators, many of whom were members of the Society, had read regular reports of the progress on the Centennial Building. By March, 1959, they could see the completed structure with bricks being washed down on the outside; by April 15 the sod had been laid around the building and all construction equipment hauled away; by May 16 it was estimated that the inside work was approximately 90% complete.

#### *Biennial Meeting*

On June 29, 1959, the 51st Biennial Meeting of the Society met in the Unitarian church across the street from the Centennial Building. After a brief business meeting and the election of curators those present crossed Iowa Avenue to inspect the progress of work in the interior of the Centennial Building.

Meanwhile, during the summer of 1959 steel

shelving was being installed in the sub-basement to store the almost 4,000 cartons of the Society's publications dating back to 1863. The gigantic task of moving these cartons, weighing an average of sixty pounds each, began on September 11. Iowa Citians, University faculty and students, and members of the Society watched for months what the *Iowa City Press-Citizen* described as the "biggest moving job to be undertaken in Iowa City this year — and one of the largest ever." It is estimated that the back publications moved into the Centennial Building weighed approximately 120 tons.

By October, 1959, the inside was fast nearing completion: the tile floors were laid, plumbing and electricity installed, and painting and air conditioning completed. The installation of steel book stacks and other equipment was under way and probably one-third of the move into the new quarters consummated. By October, too, it became apparent that, because of the rising costs, the Society would need \$19,178 to pay for the Centennial Building when completed.

A historic step was taken when the Board of Curators met in the Centennial Building for its regular monthly meeting on November 24, 1959. The members present were Hart, Mohl, Nesmith, Smith, Stronks, and Swisher. Although the book-stacks had not been erected and moving of back publications was still going on into the basement,

everyone expressed much pleasure with their new quarters.

The question before the Board was — where can it raise \$19,178? Fortunately, a way appeared when the Superintendent had an opportunity to discuss the problem briefly with members of the Budget & Financial Control Committee during a historical tour. A week later a formal request for the amount needed to complete the building was made by the president and superintendent. The request was granted without a dissenting vote.

On December 16, 1959, the Board of Curators was informed that University officials had been notified that the entire basement in Schaeffer Hall had been cleared of newspapers and back publications. This would allow the University to begin converting the area into classrooms and offices for use in the fall.

#### 1960

The most painstaking part of the move into the Centennial Building was completed during the first four months of 1960 when 80,000 books, 30,000 pamphlets, and a vast amount of manuscripts, pictures, maps, and miscellaneous material was moved under adverse weather conditions. It took two weeks and seven truck-loads, averaging approximately 2,000 books to the truck-load, to transport 14,000 volumes out of Room 305 in

Schaeffer Hall. During the early stages the books were carried, in heavy crates (called coffins) down the eighty-six steps. Later a hoist and pulley was used to let the crates down the first two flights of stairs. Finally, the University set up an elevator outside the building which greatly facilitated moving, although, because of the very nature of the material transported, it still was slow work. By mid-April the move from the third floor of Schaeffer Hall was finally completed.

Meanwhile, the Superintendent had moved his office into the Centennial Building in mid-January. The Business Office followed over in mid-February and the Associate Editor and Library Associate in April. By May a number of outstanding historians and researchers were working in the Centennial Building including such men as William Mokray, vice president of the Boston Celtics, who was writing a history of basketball in the United States; Dr. James I. Robertson, editor of *Civil War History*, and Pulitzer Prize winner MacKinlay Kantor, deeply immersed in his forthcoming book on Spirit Lake, and emphasizing, of course, the Spirit Lake Massacre. Dick Lamb was also delving into the rich records of the Society that were destined to place Gordon Locke in the Football Hall of Fame.

Once in their new quarters both the Curators and Superintendent began to think in terms of appropriate dedication services for their new Cen-

ennial Building. Fortunately, similar historical societies around the country had been watching with ever-increasing interest the effort of the Iowa society to gain a home of its own. While attending the 18th Annual Meeting of the American Association for State and Local History in Salt Lake City in 1958, the Superintendent of the State Historical Society, sensing this growing interest, invited the American Association to hold its 20th Annual Meeting in Iowa City at the time of the dedication. This invitation was formally accepted when the American Association for State and Local History held its 19th Annual Meeting in Philadelphia in 1959. It was agreed that August 31, 1960, would be Dedication Day for the Centennial Building and that the American Association would open up its four-day session at the same time in order that all might participate in the historic event.

Once agreed upon, every effort was made to have the building in readiness. Members of the Society, as well as officers of county historical societies, were alerted to the fact that they would meet and hear directors of national, state, and local, and private historical agencies from all over the country. In this race against time it may be worth recording that the airconditioning was made available one week before the Centennial Building was dedicated and the last drapes hung twenty-four hours before the big event.