

The 50th Anniversary

Fifty years have passed since the first issue of *The Palimpsest* appeared in July of 1920. When one considers the number of famous magazines that have fallen by the wayside during this period (and particularly in the past decade) an editor cannot help being pleased that *The Palimpsest* has survived and actually gained in popularity and significance with each passing year.

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the founding of *The Palimpsest* we are reprinting the long out-of-print January, 1921, number, not a single copy of which is available today for binding purposes to fill requests of librarians and others who wish to complete bound volume sets. This number has been stitched into the center of the January, 1971, issue and may be pulled out quite easily for binding. Meanwhile, present-day members may wish to compare the 1921 issue with various numbers of today's magazine.

One might point to a change in the general character of this early *Palimpsest*, with its simple but dramatic tale of two boys lost in a snowstorm in the Mason City area, and the detailed, comprehensive, and beautifully illustrated number entitled "Of Time and the Weather" which ap-

peared in January, 1969. Undoubtedly the 1921 issue will be enjoyed by readers. But it is less likely to be preserved than the latter with its historical data, cartoons, perpetual calendar, and weather statistics covering the period from 1873 to 1968. The reactions of Society members to the January, 1969, number of *The Palimpsest* may be illustrated by the following letters. From Fort Wayne, Indiana, Mrs. Irma Zagel wrote on February 13, 1969:

The Palimpsest came today. It is the best ever! The cartoons! The drawings! The old station in Dakota City! The weather records, the calendar—really it is a veritable treasure. Don't see how your Society can put out so fine a magazine every month. Everything is perfect—the format, the print, aside from the highly interesting material.

Two days later, Mrs. Harry R. Lewis wrote from Fort Dodge:

This is to say "Thank you" for the very fine January Palimpsest. I always enjoy your magazine about our good state, but this last month's "Of Time and the Weather" is the finest of all I have looked at and read. It is such a treasure to have the Perpetual Calendar; that alone is worth the price of membership in your organization.

The interest of individuals in special topics has been attested by thousands of letters over the years. Thus, Reverend John D. Clinton of Des Moines, having read the Civil War number "twice," declared it was a "super" production. The same feeling was recorded by the late W. W.

Waymack, *Des Moines Register* Pulitzer Prize winner, when he wrote that he had gained much personal satisfaction from the Civil War number:

I like this issue not only as a history of Iowa participation in that conflict, but also as an excellent "refresher course" in the war as a whole. Doubtless each reader has had, or will have, his own special appreciations, subjectively determined. One of mine is the maps that you used. Perhaps I've seen these maps, or more or less similar ones, in the past. If so, I don't remember them. Those that you selected for the PALIMPSEST gave me the best visual picture of the campaigns, especially in the sense of relating the Western campaigns to the Eastern, that I think I've ever had.

In addition to Civil War buffs, there are railroad and steamboat buffs, religion and education buffs, Indian and military buffs, baseball and football buffs. There are also political and social history buffs, agricultural and industrial buffs, and many more. One rarely knows which issue is likely to gain the most enthusiastic support until letters begin to pour in about it.

Under-estimating a printing order is just as likely as over-estimating it. An editor can only hope that a few copies will remain at the end of twenty-five, indeed, fifty years, to take care of the needs of libraries and schools which may be binding whole sets of *The Palimpsest*. During the first twenty years, a printed edition rarely exceeded 1,500 copies, of which 200 was an over-print. In 1970, with membership above 10,000, the over-

print alone was approximately 4,000 copies. Even with this increased number there have been just as many issues go out-of-print in recent years as in the period from 1920 to 1940.

Since 1920 the editors of *The Palimpsest* have depended primarily on contributions from experienced writers, most of whom have been trained historians. Thus, of the thirty leading contributors to *The Palimpsest* over the past half century, twenty-one had Ph.D. degrees, chiefly in history or political science. Of the remaining nine, all were college graduates, several of whom had taken advanced degrees in special fields. Contrary to the opinions of the uninitiated, a veritable galaxy of notable authors have contributed to *The Palimpsest* since its founding in 1920.

Of the nine contributors, one might single out individuals who not only held one or more college degrees, but also have achieved a reputation far beyond the boundaries of Iowa. Thus, Frank T. Nye, of the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, has been recognized for years as one of the top political commentators in Iowa with thirty years' experience in recording State government. His sparkling accounts of the work of the General Assembly from the 54th (1951) to the 63rd (1970) stand in sharp contrast to the dull monographs written on this subject. Frank Nye is the fourth leading contributor to *The Palimpsest*.

The contributions of the late Frank P. Dono-

van, Jr., to the history of Iowa railroads has been substantial and highly valuable. Railroad buffs from all over the United States have written for copies of his outstanding works, half of which are out-of-print at this time. Few, if any states, have had their railroad history done as completely as Iowa. The State Historical Society could make a valuable contribution by bringing together in book form the railroad writings of Donovan.

It is not only the railroad issues of *The Palimpsest* which go out-of-print. Other issues, such as those on Indians, the Amanas, the Hoover Birthplace, the Spirit Lake Massacre, and the Pioneers, have been depleted all too soon. In a few instances reprints, with the addition of pictures, maps, and pertinent references, have been reproduced after a decade or more has passed. Several numbers have passed the 100,000 mark, while a number of others are approaching this unbelievable figure.

The December, 1970, *Palimpsest* was devoted to the Hopewell Indian culture at Toolesboro. The print order for this issue was 22,000 copies, printed in anticipation of a heavy demand. Over 2,000 copies went out on special orders within the first week. It is likely the 11,000 overrun will be exhausted within the first five years.

The wide variety of publications mailed to Society membership has impressed many educators. On April 30, 1959, Professor Charles Duffy of the University of Akron wrote:

I have been a member of the State Historical Society of Iowa long enough for me to see that the organization has able, scholarly, and vigorous leadership.

The articles which appear in *The Palimpsest* cover a wide variety of topics and are of value to those whose interest lies in the history of the State of Iowa. These articles interest us today, but will be of enormous value to the cultural and intellectual historian to come. The conservation of material available in our time means that the future historian will have at hand the documents needed for his work. For much of this material he will have the assiduity of such organizations as the State Historical Society to thank.

Ten years later, in 1969, Professor Francis Aumann of Ohio State University wrote in a similar vein on the vast residue of information that has been impounded in *The Palimpsest* and has been made available to historians, teachers, and the interested public. According to Aumann:

. . . The State Historical Society of Iowa has indeed a proud record of distinguished publications in every facet of life of the commonwealth of Iowa and you personally have made an unbelievably rich contribution to this record.

It is natural for folks to express delight about an issue of *The Palimpsest* relating to their own hometown. Thus, Frank Killian, secretary of the Muscatine Chamber of Commerce, expressed his deep appreciation for the September, 1964, issue dealing with Muscatine. According to Killian: "The Muscatine *Palimpsest* has become our prize piece of literature in the promotion of our city."

Henry B. Hook, of the Davenport *Times-Democrat*, expressed equal enthusiasm for the September, 1967, issue on Davenport. After spending a "precious hour" with it he wrote, "I knew it had to be good because you wrote it. I found it to be really superb."

Dubuque-born Broadway Playright Dick Bissell described the Dubuque issue as a "dandy" while Librarian Elsie Datisman found it a "needed tool for the reference department." F. Robert Woodward, Jr., vice president and general manager of Station KDTH of Dubuque, summed up his own feelings on the Dubuque issue and others on March 4, 1965: "I should like to take this opportunity to congratulate you on the marvelous job that you are personally doing toward preserving and publicizing the heritage of our State."

Like Killian at Muscatine, the Dubuquers felt their *Palimpsest* number a fine asset when they went to Chicago and other Eastern cities to try and attract industries to Dubuque. Since city numbers are written primarily as history for the general reader, it is rewarding to find *The Palimpsest* reaching a wider audience outside the State, one that could well play a key role in enticing some industry to select Iowa for their new plant.

It is another thing when Iowans wax eloquent about an issue devoted to the hometown of someone else. On December 17, 1964, the editor of *The Palimpsest* was cheered by the following

from W. Earl Hall of the *Mason City Globe-Gazette*. "Your Dubuque *Palimpsest* is one of the greatest ever, in text and art." Of the same number, Harry and Genevieve Mauck of Council Bluffs declared: "Congratulations on another year of outstanding publications. This Dubuque issue is a honey." Mrs. Mauck, incidentally, did an outstanding number of *The Palimpsest* on her own hometown of Council Bluffs in September, 1961.

Over the past decade the Society has published a number of issues of *The Palimpsest* on important historic sites that have been designated a *Registered National Historic Landmark*, sponsored by the United States Department of the Interior through the National Park Service. Frequently, although not always, the bestowal of this honor has received impetus as a result of an issue of *The Palimpsest* devoted to the subject and sent to the National Park Service. The following historic places are illustrative:

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| 1. Herbert Hoover Birthplace | August, 1962 |
| 2. Amana Villages | March, 1963 |
| 3. Sergeant Floyd Monument | March, 1964 |
| 4. Grenville Dodge Home | November, 1966 |
| 5. Effigy Mounds National Monument | May, 1961 |
| 6. Toolesboro Mound Group | December, 1970 |

Other sites will be added in years to come. Among those recommended by the Superintendent of the Society, and about which *Palimpsest* issues have appeared in the past, are Julien Du-

buque's Grave and the Dubuque Shot Tower, the Gardner Log Cabin and Spirit Lake Massacre Museum, the Lucas Home in Iowa City, and the Harlan-Lincoln Home in Mt. Pleasant. It is worth noting that six of the nine Historic Places recognized by the National Park Service have been honored with special numbers of *The Palimpsest*.

It would appear from the above that many numbers of *The Palimpsest* possess a regional, if not national significance. Indeed, it would not be difficult to demonstrate that as many as 50 Historic Places have been the subject of special treatment in *The Palimpsest*, many of which merit consideration for Registered National Historic Landmarks. The Department of the Interior has taken a membership in the Society to assist it in developing the Mormon Trail, Lewis and Clark Trail, and the Upper Iowa as a "Wild River."

Personal contact with scores of interesting contributors represents one of the many rewards that have accrued to the present editor as he rounds out the 270th number of *The Palimpsest*. Letters from many notables constantly cross his desk.

Harry Hansen, for example, wrote the April, 1956, issue of *The Palimpsest* under the title *Davenport Boyhood*. A graduate of Davenport High School and the University of Chicago, Hansen was one of a group of war correspondents who followed the German Army into Belgium in 1914. On September 17, 1964, he wrote as follows:

Have read your presidential number with much profit; you are getting some wonderful material out of the archives and into the *Palimpsest*. The photographs are superb. I marvel how big and chesty T. R. looks especially against a background of Boy Scouts, for he really wasn't very big and in his final years seemed quite shrunken. . . .

That's a wonderful picture of F. D. R. turning to Jim Farley; the expressions on their faces are marvellous; Jim always has that contemplative look and you don't know whether he is cooking up a political deal or counting Coca Cola bottles. Apparently all the presidents and candidates laughed heartily except Herbert, who had a hard time being jovial.

Always alert to the unusual in *The Palimpsest*, Harry Hansen seemed to find time to write his impressions of various numbers. How he did it was always a mystery to the editor, who had become familiar over the years with Hansen's long string of books, his numerous contributions as Literary Editor on such newspapers as the *Chicago Daily News* (1920-1926), the *New York World* (1927-1931), and the *New York World-Telegram* (1931-1948). Many readers will recall him as the editor of the *O. Henry Prize Stories* (1933-1940) and of the *World Almanac* (1948-1965). Despite such a productive work load, Harry Hansen wrote, as recently as 1971, that he "constantly marveled at the variety of stories handled in *The Palimpsest*."

It is the wide variety of material embraced in

the first fifty volumes of *The Palimpsest* that make it the rich storehouse of Iowa history referred to by Professors Duffy and Aumann. It is this same variety of historical information that led those two outstanding American historians—Paul M. Angle and Earl Schenck Miers, to include the State Historical Society of Iowa publication program in their "Doorways to American Culture." The introduction to the twenty-three institutions singled out for this honor reads:

Doorways to American Culture gives emphasis to those institutions in America, which through their publications, have made available a vast resource of national intellectual wealth.

Smithsonian Institution	New York Public Library
Library of Congress	Colonial Williamsburg
American Antiquarian Society	State Historical Society of Iowa
American Philosophical Society	Grolier Club
United States Congress	Foreign Policy Association
American Geographical Society	Massachusetts Historical Society
The Huntington Library	Chicago Historical Society
New York University Club Library	Minnesota Historical Society
National Geographic Society	State Historical Society of Wisconsin
Essex Institute	Historical Society of Pennsylvania
American University Presses	New York Historical Society
	Indiana Historical Society

It does not take a professional historian to recognize the importance and value of *The Palimpsest* as a veritable treasure trove of Iowa history. On November 13, 1959, Senator William H. Harbor of Henderson penned the following:

Having been a member for several years I can truly say that the material sent to the members is worth many times what we are assessed. It is good for one to be able to go back into history to see the trials, tribulations, as well as the good times experienced by our ancestors. To many our state has had a rather drab and uneventful past. That is, until they are truly informed about the former years. Yes, this is money well spent.

The following comment by Thomas W. Duncan, a noted Iowa author, was written to the editor of *The Palimpsest* on April 30, 1965:

One way or another I see a lot of publications from various historical societies, and without question yours are head and shoulders above the rest. They are invariably interesting without sacrificing accuracy.

A nationally known Civil War historian, Dr. Bell I. Wiley, in a letter dated December, 1970, gave the editor of *The Palimpsest* his personal opinion of the importance of writing accurate popular history:

During my years on the National Civil War Centennial Commission (1957-1966), I had the opportunity to get a close-up view of the imaginative and effective work that you and your associates were doing to dig out and make available in attractive form information about the rich heritage of your state and region, not only as it related to the Civil War but to all other major episodes of the past.

One of your greatest contributions, in my opinion, is your ingenious work, through supervised tours, exhibits, workshops, lectures and publications, in making history come alive, and thus giving it an appeal which makes it understandable and attractive to ordinary folk. This ac-

ords with my long-held and very strong conviction that since history is made by all sorts of people, it ought to be presented in a manner that is both comprehensible and appealing to them—the layman as well as the specialist, the lowly as well as the big-wig.

This is why I write articles for *Civil War Times* and *American History Illustrated*, and why I accepted the invitation two years ago to become Chairman of the advisory Board of the National Historical Society. This is also why I have such a highly favorable opinion of your society's magazine—*The Palimpsest*. You demonstrate in that publication that history can be both authoritative and interesting and that it can serve the masses as well as the privileged.

One of the most highly regarded graduates of the University of Iowa history department is Dr. Melvin Gingerich, nationally known editor of the 4-volume *Mennonite Encyclopedia* and the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. Dr. Gingerich also is well-known to thousands of Society members through his book—*The Mennonites in Iowa*, and his splendid digest of this volume which appeared in the May, 1959, issue of *The Palimpsest*, a beautifully illustrated number, now in constant demand. Dr. Gingerich's scholarly career was launched through his State Historical Society publications. Let him tell his own story:

Now that I am retired and have time again to turn to my special interest in Iowa history, I have been reflecting on the unique role the *Palimpsest* has played through the years. I know of no other historical publication that has covered so wide a range of subjects as has yours. Political,

social, economic, cultural, literary, religious, ethnic, frontier, and biographical history, as well as other areas, have been covered. The wide use of the *Palimpsest* in the schools and the extensive membership list of the Society prove that you have met a popular demand for this type of material.

From a personal point of view, let me express my appreciation for the opportunity the *Palimpsest* has given me and other young Ph.D.'s to get our specialized articles published. As I review the list of writers, I am impressed with the quality of these scholars. Let me as one who has been the editor or associate editor of several scholarly and popular historical journals for several decades add my own testimony by saying that I have been impressed with the way in which you have struck a balance in presenting articles that are both scholarly and historically sound while at the same time popular in the best sense of the word.

One might continue at length quoting the testimony of readers of *The Palimpsest*—"that the layman as well as the specialist, the lowly as well as the big-wig" find the magazine of interest. Suffice it to say that a ten-fold increase in Society membership and a 25- to 100-fold increase in circulation point up the enthusiasm Iowans have maintained in *The Palimpsest* for over half a century. For this loyal support the present editor will always be grateful.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

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