

Comment by the Editor

A LIFETIME AGO

Three score years and ten, according to the psalmist, is the normal span of human life. A lifetime, though but a moment in eternity, is yet long enough to witness the rise or fall of nations, the conquest of natural forces, and the well-nigh universal acceptance of new ideas or institutions. It is well to pause occasionally and take thought of what has transpired within the memory of the living.

Since 1857 America has engaged in three wars and several other military exploits. Meanwhile the opinion that international disputes should be settled by adjudication is gaining general approbation. Railroads have crossed the continent, and now the mail is carried from New York to San Francisco in the air, while a human voice may be broadcast instantly to multitudes of auditors throughout the land. Just seventy years ago the Constitution of Iowa was framed in the Old Stone Capitol at Iowa City. Now it is the seventh oldest constitution of an American Commonwealth still in force. For seventy years Des Moines has been the capital of the State. During this period of a lifetime the State Historical Society of Iowa, organized in February, 1857, has been enthusiastically engaged in the pres-

ervation of materials and the dissemination of information concerning the history of the State.

HISTORY IN THE MAKING

It was not by accident that the State Historical Society was organized in the eventful winter of 1857. Iowa even then had a venerable past. A vanishing race had left numerous traces of former presence. For more than a hundred and seventy-five years explorers and traders had paddled their canoes on Iowa streams or marched across the rolling prairies. Permanent settlement had been in progress almost a quarter of a century. Many of the first settlers had reached the age of reminiscence. Already they were talking of their experiences in the good old early days. More than two decades ago they had crossed the Mississippi to make their permanent homes in the most promising land they had ever seen. As they blazed the bounds of their homesteads upon the primeval oaks or drove their claim stakes deep into the prairie soil they must have dimly sensed their part in a great movement.

During the score of years that followed, the pioneers saw the hills stripped of forests and thousands of acres of prairie land turned into corn fields. While they endured privation and hardship, they beheld the evolution of the transient frontier into a conventional and firmly rooted social order. As they toiled to earn a meager living, they had the rare and inspiring experience of helping to found a

great Commonwealth. Being law-abiding people, they maintained order upon their own authority until regularly established political institutions of their own devising could be set up. Twice in the forties they rejected a constitution for the proposed State because they did not like the boundaries it prescribed. Under a new organic law, Iowa was admitted into the Union in 1846 as the first State west of the Mississippi River in which slavery was forever prohibited. Ten years later a new political party was born in Iowa — a party that has dominated both State and national politics almost continuously ever since. Finally, in 1857, these pioneer statesmen were engaged in drafting anew their code of fundamental law.

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

All of this the fathers of the State Historical Society had seen and been. Justly proud of the Commonwealth they had founded and fully conscious of the marvelous transformations they had witnessed, the unschooled pioneers realized that their own humble lives were a part of history and the record of their achievements was worthy of being rescued from oblivion.

Actuated no doubt by such considerations, the movement to form a society for the preservation of local history was brought to a climax by an act of the Sixth General Assembly appropriating two hundred and fifty dollars annually "to a State His-

torical Society, formed or to be formed". This money, according to the law and the constitution of the Society, was to be spent "to collect, embody, arrange and preserve in authentic form, a library of books, pamphlets, maps, charts, manuscripts, papers, paintings, statuary and other materials illustrative of the history of Iowa; to rescue from oblivion the memory of its early pioneers; to obtain and preserve narratives of their exploits, perils and hardy adventures; to secure facts and statements relative to the history, genius, progress or decay of our Indian tribes, to exhibit faithfully the antiquities, and the past and present resources of the State; and to promote the study of history by lectures, and diffuse and publish information relating to the description and history of Iowa." Fifty bound copies of all documents published by the State were to be transmitted by the Society to M. Vattermere at Paris in furtherance of his system of international literary exchange — a practice which was soon found to be "a complete failure" and discontinued.

In accordance with the act of the State legislature, a meeting of prominent citizens was held in Iowa City and a constitution for the "State Historical Society of Iowa" was adopted on February 7, 1857. James W. Grimes, then Governor of the State, was chosen president. Samuel J. Kirkwood, H. W. Gray, F. H. Lee, C. F. Clarkson, and Eliphalet Price were the vice-presidents, while among the curators appear the names of such eminent men as D. W. Price,

S. H. Langworthy, F. W. Ballard, T. S. Parvin, Wm. Penn Clarke, G. W. McCleary, and LeGrand Byington. During the first year the energies of the Society were devoted mainly to the formulation of plans for the future. There can be no doubt that the founders fully appreciated the nature of history as well as the need and opportunity for preserving authentic records of the past.

The original purpose and work of the Society is perhaps best explained in an "Address to the Public" issued in 1861 by order of the Board of Curators. "A correct understanding of the real history of a community or people," the address began, "is derived less, from an account of the *prominent* public transactions, than from a knowledge of the springs and influences which have wrought the changes, or led on to the event, or condition described."

Sudden or decisive changes in human affairs are almost invariably produced by slow and steady influences working upon elementary factors. "Unfortunately for each successive generation, the real history of its predecessors as thus described, has been transpiring so silently, and so little felt and appreciated by their participants, as to fail to attract the eye or pen of contemporaneous authors, until much of the most important material has passed from the reach of history.

"And yet these inconspicuous influences, these little facts of the passing hour, these half matured

suggestions of the unheralded author, the individual exploit of the remote neighborhood, and a multitude of similar subjects, which have taken shape, and tone, and direction to the public thought and mind; or laid the foundation upon which great public interests have been erected, are the real basis of its history — the real history of which prominent incidents are but the manifestation.

“To catch and hold these transpiring events, while yet fresh in the memory of their actors, or while they can be drawn from the pens of those personally cognizant of their occurrence, to lay in store the material, which shall give to those who come after us a truthful impression of every phase of condition, physical and moral; the ratio of progress; and whatever of particular in any of its concerns will give a true representation of the age, has come to be regarded as a matter of weighty importance by the present generation of our countrymen.”

One of the functions of the Society, as conceived by its founders, was the collection of historical materials. But the idea seemed to prevail that the library would grow by voluntary contributions. State publications could be exchanged for similar documents. Books, pamphlets, maps, manuscripts, and newspapers were solicited, and thus the substance of local history would filter into the reservoir of the Society without expense. It was hoped that “pioneers” from every locality would contribute their “experiences” of early times, and that Iowa

authors would deposit autographed copies of their books for preservation in the library.

How much was accomplished during the first years is indicated by the report in 1859 that the library then contained about two thousand volumes, together with "a large number of pamphlets, maps, manuscripts, engravings and curiosities". This collection compared favorably with the libraries of much older historical societies in other States.

Since then members of the Society and others have donated many valuable items, while more liberal appropriations from the State treasury have made possible the accumulation of seventy thousand volumes. The large collection of books by Iowa authors is particularly noteworthy.

To "diffuse and publish information relating to the description and history of Iowa" has always been one of the principal objects of the Society. Not content with the mere collection of a library of historical materials, the officers of the Society, emulating the progressive spirit of the pioneers, have from the beginning blazed the trail for similar organizations elsewhere in telling the story of the Commonwealth so that all who will may read it. The realization of the significance of local history among scholars has been due in no small measure to the influence of the State Historical Society of Iowa. In no other State has the field been so thoroughly cultivated and the bounteous harvest of information so generally distributed. Carefully prepared and

well printed volumes have been issued on almost every aspect of State history. Political issues and activities have been explained, so that the experience of the past may point the way to better government in the future. Social and economic conditions have been studied, wartime endeavors have been recounted, particular subjects like education have been exhaustively treated, important documents have been published, and the biographies of illustrious Iowans have been written.

First to emphasize the dissemination of historical information, the Iowa Historical Society has also pioneered in the publication of periodicals devoted to provincial history. The *Annals of Iowa* appeared in January, 1863, the first quarterly magazine issued by a State Historical Society. Suspended in 1874 for lack of funds, it was followed eleven years later by the *Iowa Historical Record*, which in turn was superseded in 1903 by the *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, which established a new type of quarterly journals of history throughout the country. Finally, in response to the need of presenting Iowa history in a more popular form "to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished", the publication of a monthly magazine was begun in 1920. The *Palimpsest* remains unique among the publications of historical societies.

J. E. B.

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

Established by the Pioneers in 1857
Located at Iowa City Iowa

PUBLICATIONS OF THE SOCIETY

The Quarterly Journal of History
The Palimpsest—A monthly magazine
The Public Archives Series
The Iowa Biographical Series
The Iowa Economic History Series
The Iowa Social History Series
The Iowa Applied History Series
The Iowa Chronicles of the World War
The Miscellaneous Publications
The Bulletins of Information

MEMBERSHIP

Membership in the State Historical Society may be secured through election by the Board of Curators. The annual dues are \$3.00. Members may be enrolled as Life Members upon the payment of \$50.00.

Address all Communications to

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Iowa City Iowa