

# MINNESOTA HISTORY AND HERITAGE

*Understanding Our Present  
By Understanding Our Past*

Governor Rudy Perpich

*MINNESOTA has a long tradition of governors with a strong sense of history. In the early days, for example, Alexander Ramsey and Henry H. Sibley each served many years as president of the Minnesota Historical Society — a position also held for a time by William R. Marshall and more recently (1966–70) by Elmer L. Andersen. The latter and Cushman K. Davis were among governors much in demand as speakers on Minnesota history. Two other governors — Joseph A. A. Burnquist and Theodore Christianson — even wrote multivolumed histories of the state.*

*The tradition is being continued in a telling manner by present Governor Rudy Perpich who earlier served as the state's chairperson for the nation's bicentennial. On April 5, Governor Perpich delivered an unprecedented special message on Minnesota history at the Fort Snelling Chapel. In the audience of 400 were MHS employees and executive council members as well as representatives of a number of county, regional, and special historical societies and other persons interested in the state's history. The governor's address, with its summary of the present status of Minnesota history, insights into various aspects of the state's heritage, and priorities for historical programs, follows in its entirety.—Ed.*

IT IS with a great deal of pleasure that I appear here at historic Fort Snelling to share with you, professionals and enthusiasts for Minnesota history, my thoughts and recommendations regarding our heritage and the role of government in helping to preserve and enhance our past.

My concern and interest in our history is long and

deep. I have seen an immigrant generation and its children become productive and contributing Minnesotans. I have seen their struggle to maintain their own heritage and place it alongside the cultures of other ethnic groups to create a genuine American society. I have experienced and deeply felt the need of immigrants and of my own generation not to be shunned, nor swallowed up by an earlier established culture. I have seen and participated in movements for the inclusion of all human experience into our historical record and have come to appreciate the need for constant re-evaluation and openness.

History is not only a classroom or archives exercise or a subject taught by the coach. It is not the sole possession of the superpatriot or of the intellectual. We all are a part of history, and history is a part of us. The struggles of our ancestors, the sacrifices they made to achieve a better life for all of us, should have prepared us long ago to expect that newer groups in our society would make similar demands and with the same justice. Exclusionary policy leads to divisiveness, disunity, and disorder. A better understanding of our past would have cushioned the stresses of the last decade when women, minorities, and the young insisted upon their rights to be fully included in our culture. But the lessons of history are learned only when knowledge becomes a familiar part of our daily lives and thoughts.

For the last few years I have been able to put my feelings into constructive action as the state's chairperson for the bicentennial. I have traveled the length and

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breadth of our state and have seen and felt the thirst for participation in our history expressed by young and old both in rural and urban sections of Minnesota. Long before *Roots* appeared as a book and on television, demonstrating the hunger of our Black citizens to learn about their heritage, I sensed the same hunger among all segments of our state's population. It was expressed in the efforts of individuals and groups to trace the history of their families, to understand their folk heritage, their communities, and their institutions. It was expressed in the efforts to preserve artifacts from the past — lighthouses, bridges, buildings — each a living reminder of the state as it was. It was expressed in the massive volunteer community efforts to clean up the environment so as to bequeath a portion of the state's natural beauty to future generations. These were not exercises in nostalgia. They were serious attempts to understand our present by understanding our past. Our bicentennial efforts were only a beginning, however. Too often as a nation we go off on fashionable binges. I do not believe that we can afford to make history a passing bicentennial fad.

Here in Minnesota we pride ourselves on our quality of life, and I think we have good reason to. As Harrison Salisbury has recently observed, there is a unique "Minnesota spirit." I firmly believe that much of this spirit comes from the living ties with the past that our state has cherished. We are not a bland, standardized people, living on the two-dimensional plane of the present, without depth or perspective. Nor are we a homogenized people, unaware of the widely varied cultures from which we have come. The sweat and sorrows and dreams of our grandparents and great-grandparents as they struggled to turn the prairies and forests of this tough, beautiful land of ours into farms and towns are still very close to most Minnesotans. Even our political traditions of active citizen participation and maverick independence are with us each day — commemorated in the very names of our two major parties.

Evidence that a strong sense of the past has taken firm root in all parts of the state is unmistakable. The impressive growth of county and local historical programs within the past generation prove this: Expanded activities; collections of photographs, manuscripts, and museum items; marker programs; audio-visual presentations; sites and buildings protected from the onslaught of the bulldozers; lectures; county, township, and community histories are evidence of our people's hunger for knowledge of the past. People of all ages have taken increasing interest in their neighborhoods, capturing the spirit of their communities in books, articles, films, and even in the physical renovation of the buildings which surround them.

These activities received a powerful stimulus from the observance of the Minnesota territorial centennial in

1949 and was reinforced nine years later by the celebration of the statehood centennial. Also helping to create a favorable climate were two laws enacted by the state legislature. A 1953 statute, later liberalized, permitted county boards to make a special tax levy for the support of historical work, and in 1957 the legislature enabled them to provide physical facilities and maintenance for historical societies.

A study issued by the American Association for State and Local History shows that preservation of history has received its widest and most sympathetic support from local government in the Middle West and that Minnesota leads the fifty states in the amount of public funds granted for historical purposes by boards of county commissioners. Our own state Historical Society's surveys show that annual county support for history in Minnesota approximates a million dollars and that more than half of the state's eighty-seven counties are granting such support on a regular basis.

Paralleling the steady growth of county organizations during the past decade have been two other significant trends. Regional organizations bringing counties and an occasional local group together have taken on an important role. Notable among these are the First District Historical Assembly (the counties of southeastern Minnesota), the Central Minnesota Historical Assembly, Pioneerland Historical Assembly, and the interstate and international Red River Valley Historical Society. Through meetings and workshops these groups have stimulated new ideas and experiments. More recently another movement has gained momentum — the formation of local historical organizations and ethnic historical groups. All of these draw on the skills offered by our state's historians and folklorists.

Thus, over the past generation local history in Minnesota has become an extensive enterprise with firm "grass roots" participation and support in hundreds of communities. This is a broad and stable base, one would think, on which to build for the future. Ultimately, however, the values and uses of history and tradition must not be judged by the number of organizations and buildings, by the size of commemorations and displays, or by the quantity of money spent. They will be determined by the individuals who accept or reject the past as a meaningful and vital force in their lives.

The relevance of history to today's world has been widely questioned. Some argue that the traditional interpretation of American history is in fact only the history of the dominant ethnic group — or a glorification of the lucky winners in a vast free-for-all of exploitation that we have traditionally looked upon as building civilization in a wilderness. In meeting the challenges posed by a new generation of relentlessly honest young people, we must be prepared to look at the past through *fresh eyes*. We may be startled at some of the insights that appear if

for a moment we reverse our field of vision and look at the story of a town or county or region through the eyes of its vanquished. We may see Indians driven from their homes and told by a chorus of well-meaning voices that nowhere in the future is there a place for their holy beliefs and cherished customs — that to survive they must deny their identity and become white men. We may see immigrants, torn between hope for the New World and homesickness for the old, watching their children slowly weaned from the old ways and the old language to become foreigners under their very roofs. We will see towns dead or dying along with the hopes that built them when the railroad located elsewhere; we will see farmers driven under by drought or debt or grasshoppers, packing up their few belongings and sadly moving on; we will see game destroyed, forests leveled, hillsides eroded, and streams polluted by careless greed.

And inevitably the question will arise: What have we now, and is it worth the cost? For some the answer may be yes, for others, no — but if history is to have meaning for the present and future, the questions must be honestly faced.

PRESERVATION of our historic environment should be one of our major objectives. We must be sure that the bulldozer does not serve as a substitute for historic planning and preservation in the guise of progress.

People throughout the state are determined to save their neighborhoods. Many have devised creative new ways to use old, historic buildings. On Milwaukee Avenue in Minneapolis, old homes of railroad workers built in the 1880s have been rebuilt and are now used as homes by young families. Irvine Park and Summit Avenue in St. Paul and the Duluth Depot are other examples of creative restoration and preservation. These activities are a challenge to the rest of us to replace the bulldozer with innovative plans for historic preservation.

Before we preserve we must know what we have. There is, therefore, an urgent need to identify, inventory, and organize information about Minnesota's historical resources in a comprehensive plan. Such a plan would be invaluable as a guide for a variety of purposes — economic, educational, and cultural. As a result of several pieces of federal legislation the states are required to review all federally related projects to ascertain whether any historic values are threatened by development projects. There is a need to develop an adequate data base so as to be able to respond to the several hundred such requests made each year. At the present time, approximately 500 sites and buildings from Minnesota are on the federal and state registers. It is estimated that 3,000 historic sites in the state remain to be inventoried, analyzed, and authenticated.

A further need for such a statewide historical plan is educational in the broadest sense. We need to inventory our historical museums — now more than 300 in number — and provide readily available information about each of them. The same is true of historical societies — regional, county, local, and specialized — which exceed 250 in the state. The state plan would describe each in terms of location, collections, history, purpose, and size. A major part of this planning effort would be to identify the hundreds of historical collections in the state — that is, agricultural implements, firefighting equipment, horsedrawn vehicles, automobiles, and a host of other items. It also would include a comprehensive inventory of newspaper collections in the state. These are scattered throughout Minnesota. They need to be scouted, identified, and utilized to fill the gaps in the state collection at the Minnesota Historical Society before they crumble away.

The plan would constitute an encyclopedia of Minnesota's historical resources. It also would provide the state with a planning tool that could readily document where the state's valuable historic sites are and thus enable development projects early in the planning process (roads, power lines, pipelines, shopping centers, housing projects, etc.) to be reviewed for historic preservation needs before development plans become frozen. With this over-all data base, a Minnesota historical plan would be put together that would be of invaluable use to the state, counties, cities, and regions in charting a course for historic preservation, recommending legislation needed in this field to the 1979 legislature, and bringing into sharp focus what programs and projects most need the Minnesota Historical Society's grant-in-aid program in the future. To formulate this plan, I am requesting an appropriation of \$500,000 for the next biennium.<sup>1</sup>

LOCAL AND COUNTY history is the foundation upon which state and national history is built. Not only must we assist the local communities and counties in preserving historic buildings and creating exhibit and museum programs, but we must also stimulate the grass roots interest in history by making available the best professional assistance so that the record of the past is made accessible to all our citizens. The present state grant-in-aid program has been in existence since 1969. Grants are made to county and local historical organizations for preservation and exhibit or museum programs, but not for *new* construction. We should expand this program, not only by making it available to more groups but also by making these grants applicable to the writing and interpretation of local and county history in the light of fresh and more inclusive perspectives.

County histories, where they exist, are often dated. They reflect the racial and cultural attitudes of an earlier

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<sup>1</sup> The legislature cut this figure to \$300,000. — Ed.

day. They are sometimes incomplete and nearly always hard to use. This must be changed. To increase the state's level of support for this program, I am requesting an appropriation of \$1,000,000 for the 1978-79 biennium.<sup>2</sup>

THE INTERPRETIVE center program is aimed at developing new facilities at major state and regional historical centers. This program has a different thrust than the grant-in-aid program. The simplest definition of an interpretive center is that it is a "storytelling museum." A traditional museum focuses on displaying a collection of objects; an interpretive center exists to tell the story of a region, an event, an era, a historical site, an individual, or a group of people.

An interpretive *program* also tells a story. It may do so through audio-visual shows, guided tours, lectures, and re-enactments (often called "living history") — or it may involve the visitor in activities which lead to a better understanding of the life of a particular time and place. Such a program may be associated with an interpretive center or a historic site, or it may be carried directly to the places where people are — such as schools, retirement homes, and civic gatherings. Interpretation, like written history, seeks to inform people of their heritage. In addition, modern interpretation tries to bring alive for viewers their own links with the past and to make history an immediate and memorable personal experience. We should encourage mutual help and co-ordination of programs among the groups engaged in interpreting history in the various sections of the state. Regional councils should be formed as a preliminary step toward active state aid in using more effectively those resources that already exist.

Our interpretive center program must be expanded to make history a living experience, not only for our own people but also for the many visitors to Minnesota. In the process, the state's economic development will be materially assisted because these centers attract tourists and enhance areas as desirable places to live and work. To implement this program, I am requesting an appropriation of \$2,000,000 for the 1978-79 biennium.<sup>3</sup>

Five hundred thousand people from all over the state come to the Capitol complex each year. They come as citizens' groups voicing their concerns about public issues. They come as school groups to learn about the functions of government. They come as history enthusiasts to see and to use the rich collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. And they come as tourists seeking to learn about the Capitol and its history — *their* history.

What is it that they find when they arrive? No place to park. Difficult directions to remote conferences. Crowded hearing rooms where they cannot hear. Inadequate facilities for quietly talking with government

officials in a positive learning atmosphere. Small exhibit galleries where less than 1 per cent of the artifacts of Minnesota Historical Society's collections are displayed. This must be changed and the State Capitol must become a more attractive and accessible source for the teaching and learning of our Minnesota heritage and government. A people's building which encourages all citizens to participate in their history and government is required.

PUBLIC AWARENESS and appreciation of our past and our heritage begins in the schools. We must begin to reach the students in all levels of our educational system. The first requirement to make Minnesota history come alive in the classroom is attractive, interesting curriculum materials. Multimedia curriculum packages on the Ojibway (Chippewa) Indians and on Minnesota politics, developed by the Minnesota Historical Society, are a first step in this direction. Similar teaching materials are needed for immigrant history, labor history, and agricultural history. In this way we can make sure that all schools, large and small, rural and urban, can meaningfully teach our history.

Well-trained and enthusiastic teachers are also needed to stimulate the study of our history and heritage. It is unfortunate that the history department of our major university in recent years has not been able to give priority attention to our state's history, for many of our elementary and secondary school teachers receive their training at the University of Minnesota. This gap is being filled now on a temporary basis, and I recommend that a Minnesota historian be added to the university history faculty.

The state Department of Education should encourage schools in the various regions of the state to offer language courses in the dominant traditional languages of a particular region. It is unfortunate that my children can no longer converse in Croatian the way my wife and I can. To teach Danish in Askov and Finnish, Slovenian, Croatian, and Italian on the Iron Range, German in St. Cloud and New Ulm, Swedish in Chisago County, and Norwegian in Glenwood, for example, would bring children closer to their linguistic cultural heritage and at the same time reverse the trend to foreign language illiteracy which has plagued this country since the 1920s.

Local school districts should take advantage of local human resources in teaching community and local history. Many of our older citizens can be tapped as a major historical resource and would be happy to participate in local history programs through the schools. Enthusiastic and well-prepared teachers, taking advantage of stimulating curriculum materials, can begin to reverse

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<sup>2</sup> The legislature upheld this request. — Ed.

<sup>3</sup> The legislature cut this figure to \$1,450,000. — Ed.

the trend of neglect of Minnesota history which has been the rule rather than the exception in our schools during the past few decades. Coupled with student field trips to the major sites of our history and to a rejuvenated State Capitol area we can make a major contribution to the understanding of our history and to the training of a new generation of educated and informed citizens.

THE WRITTEN ACCOUNTS of our history by the trained historian are the foundation upon which our historic sites preservation program, our interpretive center program, and our educational efforts rest. Without accurate, critical, and yet sympathetic books and articles on our state's history the programs to make our heritage more widely available to our people cannot work. We can be proud of the high levels of professional achievement of those Minnesota historians who preceded us. Their books and articles are firm foundations upon which to build. They often did not include workers, farmers, Blacks, women, Indians, and the full range of ethnic minorities in their written accounts of our history. The present and future generations of trained historians are redressing this imbalance. We must stimulate research and writing of our state's history by an expanded program of research grants and publication opportunities. We have made a valiant start with our bicentennial efforts. This must be a beginning and not an end.

Archives and manuscript collections are among the most important source materials with which the historian works. Our state has done well in collecting and preserving the records of the past. With the merger of the state archives and the manuscripts division of the Minnesota Historical Society we can do even better. A more vigorous effort must be made to collect, inventory, and make more easily available papers of individuals, institutions, and governmental agencies. Church records, trade union manuscripts, business records, and the papers and correspondence of voluntary associations must find their way into public record centers. The state is fortunate in having regional record centers as well as special subject matter archives, such as the immigrant archives and the social welfare archives at the University of Minnesota. The state has generously provided modern facilities for our state archives and manuscripts in the new Minnesota Historical Society Research Center in St. Paul. We should also consider a similar facility for the special subject matter archives at the University of Minnesota.

Another major historical source are the newspapers of our state. We cannot afford to allow the printed record of our past to disintegrate. An excellent job of collecting the newspapers has been done. But many of the older papers are deteriorating. Researchers often find that the newsprint disintegrates into dust after use. We must preserve this valuable source of our history through an expanded program of microfilming. An expanded archives effort,

more vigorous collection and processing of manuscripts, microfilming of our newspapers, and stimulating creative efforts by historians will assure an ever-increasing awareness and appreciation of our past and will ensure that our programs of historic site preservation, interpretation, and education will rest on solid scholarly foundations.

Historical organizations — regional, county, local, and ethnic — proliferate in number. This is good. With numbers, however, come the danger of fragmentation, duplication, and wasting of precious resources. We need to keep working at integration and co-operation in the common cause of our history and heritage. Governmental agencies can and should assist in our efforts to preserve Minnesota's heritage.

Our challenge to individuals is also great. The pursuit of history is a never-ending adventure with great rewards for the searcher. It invites your participation to seek out the story of your family, ethnic group, neighborhood, community, and state. The benefits to be gained for ourselves and our civilization are beyond measure. History is a humanized force in our increasingly impersonal and technological world. A sense of history can anchor us firmly in our own identity which will enable us better to understand our neighbors in the state, the nation, and the world.

My work as chairman of the Minnesota Bicentennial Commission gave me a heightened appreciation for the importance of history. Since 1849, when the first territorial legislature chartered the Minnesota Historical Society, our state has been one with a strong sense of respect for its past. It is imperative that we continue and expand this tradition — that we do more as a state to preserve and interpret our history. This is especially true now when changes in our customs, our ways of life, and even in the environment around us are so rapid that they create great gaps of understanding between generations. A community without a knowledge of its past is like a person with amnesia. It can exist and function from day to day, but its lack of memory leaves it without a feeling of purpose, direction, or identity.

Yet a sense of history is more than organizations, buildings, and budgets, important as these are. It is recognizing the influence of the past in the very web of our daily lives — in our habits of thought and speech, in the streets we walk through, in the ways we earn a living. It is in the touch of humility that comes with knowing that wherever we are in life, we stand upon the shoulders of those who have gone before. For, as I have said, history is all of us. It is imperative that we do more as individuals, organizations, and as a state to preserve and interpret our history and heritage. I have outlined today some ways in which we can do this. Together we can. For as I have said before and will say again — none of us is as smart as all of us.



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