

May 1980



Technical Sheet Number 6

ORGANIZING A LOCAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A local historical society is a valuable asset to its community. Its contributions may include the collection and preservation of the written records of a community, educational programs, establishment of an historical museum, and participation in the preservation of historical sites or buildings, as well as many other activities.

When a group of interested people wishes to organize a local historical society, a statement of purpose should be written, defining the possible activities of the proposed society. A statement of purpose, designed to attract prospective members, should outline both the immediate and the future goals of the potential organization. The statement of purpose, as well as the time, date, and place of an organizational meeting, should be well publicized. Local newspapers and radio stations should be informed, and the organizing committee should personally contact members of the community, urging them to attend the first meeting. They should also work to obtain the support of public officials and leading citizens of the area. Service and civic organizations, women's clubs, and fraternal groups should be contacted. In addition to providing possible support, several of their individual members may be interested in joining the historical society. School and library officials in your area should also be advised of the proposed organization.

Your organizing group should also consider the regional limits of the society. Both city and county historical societies are common in Iowa. If you are attempting to organize a county historical society, make every attempt to draw members from all areas of the county, rather than making one town the exclusive center of activity. Invite citizens from all the different towns and townships to participate in the planning stages. The organizational meeting should be held on a convenient date, so as many people as possible may attend. The meeting should begin with a brief talk by a temporary chairman, explaining why the meeting was called and why a local historical society is desirable. This should be followed by a program aimed at interesting the group in local history. It can be given by any knowledgeable person, such as a teacher of history at a school or nearby college, or by a representative of the State Historical Society.

After the program, a motion should be made to organize your local historical society. Discussion should follow the motion, although remarks should be kept brief at this point. If the motion is passed, a committee on organization should be appointed by the chairman, and approved by the membership. The committee should be representative of all of the people attending the



meeting, and not just include members of the organizing group. This committee will be responsible for either drafting a constitution and by-laws, or for deciding in favor of incorporating the organization. These documents may be discussed at the next meeting. Before adjournment, the time, date, and place of the second public meeting should be set, and arrangements made for news media publicity about the initial meeting.

Under articles of incorporation, your society will become a legal person. This will enable the society to acquire property, and prevent individual members from becoming liable for debts incurred by the society. Incorporation also encourages citizens to contribute gifts to your organization. To incorporate your society, obtain the necessary forms from the Secretary of State in Des Moines. A lawyer may be retained to aid with the paperwork involved. If incorporated, a society may be declared a tax-exempt organization by making formal application with the Internal Revenue Service. If your application is approved, the society's income will not be taxed. This status also permits donors to deduct their contributions to the society from their taxable income.

If your society decides not to incorporate, a constitution should be drafted, outlining the rules and regulations of the society. It should be kept simple, and not cluttered with detailed rules. It should include a provision regarding the disposition of the collections of the society, in case it ever dissolves. The by-laws of the society specify the organization and the procedures of the organization. The by-laws should include provisions for such things as membership dues, the permanent committees, and duties of officers.

The second meeting will deal with the problems of formal organization. The report from the committee on organization should be put forth to the group, followed by the proposed by-laws. Copies of this material should be distributed to everyone present. Plenty of time for discussion should be allowed. If the constitution or articles of incorporation are accepted, your society is ready to proceed by those rules. A nominating committee should be appointed by the temporary chairman or membership to select a slate of officers, and a list of candidates for the board of directors, to be voted upon at the next meeting.

This technical sheet is only brief guide, and successful methods vary widely. Although a good plan of organization is needed for a successful society, it does not guarantee one. Members must work diligently throughout the life of the society, to keep it successful and active.

Prepared by Steven J. Fuller
and Loren N. Horton

For further information, contact the Field Services Section, State Historical Society. Also refer to: Clement M. Silvestro, Organizing a Local Historical Society (1968), available from the American Association for State and Local History, 1400 Eighth Avenue South, Nashville, Tennessee 37203, for \$2.25.