

HISTORY OF HISTORICAL DEPARTMENT

Historical Building, Des Moines

by  
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Historical Department, Historical Building (history of)

Iowa romance and history alike exist, and like our own wild rose in January, await but the springtime warmth of more love and greater learning to become more and more a part of Iowa life. The germs and roots exist in Iowa from which shall spring titles, themes, texts and temperaments such as the English use in racial handling of their national arts and philosophy--if indeed these are racial, and are handled nationally.

History is indistinct of meaning to most of us. The very word has been made to cover too much. Before the word Iowa, as adapted to geography, was ever used, history had been separated into its parts. The history of humanity itself, subdivided many times; and the history of other life than that of mankind, called natural history.

Iowa history, therefore, must rest upon ample truth of substantial quantity and authentic character, touching life and its activity or evolution, both in the fields of natural and human history, and for the area in geography to which the name Iowa is or ever was applied.

A sickle bar lays low a swath of grain, each standing straw of which holds its load of grasshoppers. When the straw falls gracefully backward the insect host rises, scatters forward and about, only to die or again to be routed out. Iowa folk were like that. Our people hopped into Iowa from the east and elsewhere, remained awhile, left a group of kin or a colony, then died or

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hopped again. History asks why they hopped; how did they hop; what did they eat; what did they seek; which hopped the farthest; which were happy and which were not; which thrived and which failed; which type or individual promised best to maintain and transmit to the remotest time the best in hopperdom.

Now Iowa's effort to answer these queries, is to lay aside and save in orderly repositories, such objects and manuscript material as reveal by themselves or by other evidence, such persons, processes and events as shall certainly be encountered after years by the seeker who traces affairs then current to their sources.

Iowa is doubly rich in its historical equipment. There are both the Historical Department of Iowa at Des Moines and the State Historical Society at Iowa City. The latter is a voluntary association of members whose officials lead the entire western country in study of historical materials. The members are charged a modest fee, and receive many times its equivalent of value in publications. These fees are augmented by legislative appropriations. Collection of historical material at Iowa City is but a minor function of the society. It is mainly an institution for research and publication.

On the other hand the Historical Department of Iowa at Des Moines is an arm of the state, just as are the insurance and banking departments. Its main function is the collection and orderly preservation of historical objects and history sources.

Let us suppose that in 1977, when our state shall be twice as old as it is now, the governor shall wish to examine Iowa

affairs of a hundred years earlier. In response to his inquiry, the man or woman then doing my work can send to him indexes on John F. Lacey, Horace E. Deemer, Grenville M. Dodge, William B. Allison and many others.

The Lacey index, assembled from all our divisions, would be somewhat like this:

From the division of art and autographs--portrait in oil; 80 manuscript addresses on the Iowa G. A. R., agriculture, pioneers, recreation, conservation, and bar associations.

From the newspaper division--Oskaloosa Herald complete from 1855 to 1892, and other files.

From the Iowa Authors' division--Lacey's digest; John F. Lacey, a Biography; innumerable pamphlets, clippings and references.

From the museum division--Lacey's watch, and other personal tokens; Civil war objects and commissions.

From the archives division--Papers and letters from Lacey to the governors and other state officials during forty years.

From the curator's office files--Lacey's long and intimate correspondence as a lawyer, soldier, legislator in congress, historian and orator with Charles Aldrich, founder of the Historical Department.

Can the governor of Iowa in 1977 possibly go astray upon his facts, or be uninspired by the spirit of Lacey's day? All Iowa at that time may be interested and aided thru this source.

It is true there will be books and books. But books seldom are foundations for other books. The Historical Department of Iowa mainly gathers, preserves and makes easily available

the very matter from which Iowa books may be produced.

Iowa has one of the best buildings in America dedicated to the care and use of its Historical Department. Of fireproof construction, it is nevertheless not fireproof. Floors, doors, window frames and furniture are of wood. Alterations to fireproof material have been biennially asked for, and some time will be made.

Law requires every official and employe at the seat of government to preserve his predecessor's records and correspondence until they are ten years old, then to transfer them to the Historical Department. In the archives division they are cleansed, classified, filed, indexed and encased in filing boxes that occupy steel cases. In Iowa, as in no other state so surely and readily, one can in a minute find any paper that came into being in any Iowa office earlier than 1912, providing it was not destroyed or lost before transmission to the Historical building.

There is on file the very first bill for an act introduced, with the amendments proposed. It is indispensable to one seeking information on educational history.

The art and autograph collection ranges from formal portraits in oil, pastel, bronze and marble to halftone prints, steel engravings, photographs and woodcuts. These are displayed in one of the best-lighted and appointed galleries in the west. There are handwritten letters, drafts of documents, and the like. Thus we have Lacey's portraits, at different periods of his life, in different artists' media, and his autograph letters to presidents and statesmen upon vital topics. All are in drawers, under glass.

In Iowa authors' division, which is part of the library, are biographical outlines in the form of questions, the answers

to which are in autograph writing, which is an original record. Such an outline affords indisputable evidence on the points usually sought in the lives of noted persons. We have answered from these sources many moot questions. One concerned the correct spelling of the middle name of Governor Shaw, whose biography, printed in a number of reliable publications, identifies Leslie Mortimer Shaw as Lesslie Mortier Shaw. His fully written name, in a broad, firm hand makes of this sheet of paper a supreme court upon this point.

And the mine of newspapers! Bulk? Surely. So much that no single individual or association in Iowa should be expected to provide space for it. Nor should the public, or any individual now or later arrogate the power to neglect or abandon it. The Ottumwa Courier, for instance, has a run of some seventy years. When in 1910 Ottumwa challenged a railroad's right to use its streets, our collection had the very issue, published in the 50's, in which appeared the official notice, ordinance and record of the city council on the subject.

It is a classic tale of George E. Roberts that when Coin's financial school was sweeping the country with its doctrine, Mr. Roberts compiled, mainly from our files, the facts he marshalled in refutation. So "sound money" met "fiat." And by the way whoever heard of U.S. gold coin not passing at par? A letter from St. Louis to a resident of Dubuque relates that such a thing happened in the forties. The letter is not properly part of the newspaper division, yet a cross reference to it in the manuscript division ought to put any future Roberts in the way of finding it.

And so, by cross reference, not yet completed, which

makes all divisions intercommunicative, one may be brought to the cross section of events of any given Iowa point of time or place.

There will be no men of Iowa, whose shadows fall for any length of time upon Iowa soil, who cannot be seen and estimated with practical exactness, from the resources I have named.

"Relics" have little value save as they illustrate some important person, process or event. Only objects having that quality are admitted now to our museum. Moreover the museum has the same accuracy and fulness of identification as would support upon evidence in a court of record.

Of such a character is Lacey's watch and a hundred thousand other objects. Near Lacey's is the watch that Kirkwood carried on his pilgrimages from Iowa City to Davenport during the Civil war. It told him when to expect dispatches of battles, of which he had received advance mail advices. The late Judge Eichelberger of Bloomfield writes, in our manuscript division, how when he was a reporter on a Davenport paper, "Old Sam" would mysteriously show up and haunt the telegraph offices, how Eichelberger watched him and how unerringly he caught for his paper first, many tremendous announcements to Iowa readers.

Of like character is the paper tape with impressed dots and dashes, done in the usual course of telegraph business in the Keokuk office, which imparted to a national official temporarily at his home, the first news of Lincoln's assassination.

How are these materials used? The greater part, in number, by being merely seen. But scores of requests are made each week by officials and professional persons, and thru these channels our work passes unidentified into the current of thought and action of the state. That is our substantial contribution.

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The present curator and his loyal staff observe each year the passing of Iowa citizens of wealth, who neither have descendants nor make bequests to philanthropy. The five per cent collateral inheritance tax on their estates last year netted \$750,000. That sum disappeared among general state moneys, and left no impression. If the \$15,000,000 the tax represented could, thru love for and pride in our state, be in ever so small a fraction diverted to allaying Iowa pain, ignorance and low ideals, it would go far toward fixing creditably forever the names of our people, that vanish so soon after distribution of the resources of the dead.