

Organization, Purposes and
Activities of Local Historical
Societies in Iowa

E.E. Martin

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BULLETIN OF INFORMATION SERIES: NO. 16

EDITED BY JOHN E. BRIGGS

Organization, Purposes and Activities
of
Local Historical Societies
in Iowa

COMPILED BY

ETHYL E. MARTIN

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FOREWORD

This bulletin is intended to provide helpful suggestions for the organization of local historical societies in Iowa and for the stimulation and promotion of the local societies already organized.

Much of the material is taken from bulletins published by the Society when the first local historical societies in Iowa made their appearance about forty years ago. Some very timely suggestions are derived from an address by Arthur J. Larsen, Superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society, at the organization meeting of the Iowa Association of Local Historical Societies. A recent publication of the American Association for State and Local History — *What Should Our Historical Society Do?*, by Edward P. Alexander, Superintendent of the Wisconsin Historical Society — furnished stimulating ideas.

The bulletin is not exhaustive. It is meant to be helpfully advisory. The general information should be adapted to meet local needs. From time to time additional material can be included in future bulletins. Suggestions for such additions will be welcomed by the State Historical Society.

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IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

The importance of local historical societies lies in the fact that they serve as local centers of historical interest and their activities are a step in the direction of covering the whole field of local history more adequately.

From 1821, when the first county historical society in the United States was organized at Salem, Massachusetts, under the name of the Essex Historical Society (now known as Essex Institute)¹, the formation of local historical societies in the United States has continued; but the periods of greatest activity have been associated with centennial anniversaries and patriotic events.

The earliest county historical societies in Iowa were formed under the guidance of the State Historical Society during the years when Benjamin F. Shambaugh as its first superintendent was engaged in the development and expansion of the activities and the support of the State Society. It was also a period of semi-centennial anniversaries in the State.

Two societies in Iowa were formed in 1901 — the Lucas County Historical Society, dis-

¹ *Proceedings of the Essex Institute*, Vol. I, pp. 3-4.

continued in 1924; and the Decatur County Historical Society, discontinued in 1934. Of three societies formed in 1904 two have been active continuously: the Madison County Historical Society and the Historical Society of Linn County. Local societies organized in Washington and Poweshiek counties in 1905 are at present inactive.

The revival of interest in organizing and developing county historical societies in Iowa during the present year probably had its impetus in the celebration of the Territorial Centennial in 1939 and certainly is stimulated by the approaching State Centennial to be observed in 1946.

The effort to promote the organization and activities of these societies resulted in the formation of the Iowa Association of Local Historical Societies on October 11, 1941. The Association has state-wide representation in its membership and in the personnel of its governing board. It has the support and cooperation of the two established historical agencies in the State, namely, the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa City and the State Department of History and Archives at Des Moines. As a result of its activities, several new county historical societies have been organized.

FORM OF ORGANIZATION

The form of organization of a local historical society may be provided for by a constitution and by-laws or by articles of incorporation. The older societies in Iowa were organized under a constitution. Some of these were incorporated later. The more recent societies have been incorporated under the provisions of Chapter 394 of the 1939 Code of Iowa and acts amendatory thereto. Incorporation of a society exempts the officers and members from personal liability.

On pages 25-30 of this bulletin will be found the Constitution and By-laws of the Madison County Historical Society, adopted March 15, 1904, and representing the earlier type of organization. This society was incorporated in 1928.

On pages 33-38 there are printed the Articles of Incorporation of the Cerro Gordo County Historical Society, which was organized on September 25, 1941, under the provisions of the 1939 Code of Iowa.

The business affairs of a local historical society are usually conducted by a board of directors or executive committee. Annual meetings are the general practice, though some local societies meet more frequently. At these annual meetings officers are nominated and

elected, there are committee reports and other routine business, with minutes kept regularly and filed as a valuable index to material relating to the history of the locality. Following the business meeting a program of addresses or other features of interest to the general public is presented.

MEMBERSHIP

The provisions for membership are uniformly democratic. In general any person residing within the county or other area covered by the organization may obtain membership by application and the payment of the membership dues. Often there is provision for life membership after a certain number of years of active membership or upon the gift of a specified sum of money for the purposes of the society. The annual dues are usually one dollar.

PURPOSES

The stated purposes of the local historical society are to collect, preserve, and disseminate the materials of local history. Letters and diaries relating to the life of the pioneers, early settlers, and distinguished citizens; old family Bibles containing genealogical material; account books containing data on prices and

commodities; and other private papers or photographs in the possession of persons who may or may not recognize their historical value are secured through voluntary gift for permanent preservation. The important public archives of counties, towns, and villages are safeguarded from unwarranted destruction. Church records are preserved. Newspaper files and other local publications are kept for future reference. Provision is made for correct marking of historic sites by State agencies. In addition to these specific purposes, there is the general aim to promote and preserve a vital interest in State and local history.

ACTIVITIES

The activities of local historical societies will vary with the initiative and resourcefulness of the leadership and the interest of the members. Undoubtedly interest can be stimulated by a greater variety in programs.

In addition to talks and formal addresses on the history of the county, an occasional pageant or historical play might attract more public interest. Forums on local history, panel discussions, quiz programs, and costume parties in connection with important State or local anniversaries could be effective. Special programs provided by schools or churches could

be encouraged and utilized at meetings of the local historical society.

Programs can be held in various sections of the county from year to year with features relating especially to that area. An occasional tour of the county with short historical talks about the places visited could be substituted for a meeting of the society. In some instances these tours could be extended into neighboring counties with a common historical background. Such tours could form a part of the observance of a county anniversary, such as the centennial of its organization.

Where radio facilities are available and time can be arranged at regular intervals, such as once a month, interviews on pioneer life in the county or important events of local significance would attract many listeners. An occasional skit or dramatic presentation could be used to vary the program. There should be careful preparation of the material under the direction of an experienced person. At the outset it would be well to limit the period to fifteen minutes. Excellent programs of this type might find a commercial sponsor.

The activities of a local historical society should enlist the cooperation of the schools of the county. Teachers should be encouraged to give their pupils such projects as the col-

lection of material and the writing of historical essays or stories about their county, their school, their church, or the community in which they live.

Finally, the local historical societies will find it advantageous to cooperate with other agencies interested in State and local history. As auxiliary members of the State Historical Society of Iowa for a period of forty years, the local societies have received all of the publications issued by the Society. Members of the staff have appeared on programs, and requests for helpful suggestions have received careful attention. The same spirit of helpfulness has prevailed in the cooperation of the State Department of History and Archives at Des Moines. The harmonious cooperation of all groups interested in a common purpose will result in unexpected accomplishments.

PROPERTY

The property of the local historical society consists of such materials as manuscripts, books, maps, museum items, portraits, paintings, and public archives.

The acquisitions of the local society can be cared for and displayed more adequately if funds are available for the services of a curator. Occasionally it will be possible to secure

volunteer services of a trained person on a part-time basis.

A card catalogue of acquisitions should be maintained, indicating the name of the donor, the date of acquisition, and items of interest concerning the gift. The catalogue should be classified with guide cards indicating sections devoted to books, manuscripts, photographs, etc.

The proper care and recording of acquisitions is a matter of vital concern, since materials donated to a local or State historical society represent a "public trust". Much of the significance of a museum piece is lost if the data concerning its former use and ownership is unknown or forgotten.

HOUSING OF THE SOCIETY

Some few local historical societies have been fortunate enough to receive donations of a suitable building with an endowment fund for maintenance. More often quarters must be sought in a public building, such as the county courthouse, the public library, or the community building. Where space is available in a public library, the librarian serves as curator and has the necessary training for the proper cataloguing and care of the material.

One of the real problems of the local society

is to find suitable housing under friendly auspices in a location which is easily accessible to the citizens of the community. In such quarters provision can be made for interesting displays of historical material. Displays can be changed from time to time to stimulate and promote interest in the work of the society. Modern technical skill in lighting and arrangement can add materially to the effectiveness of these displays.

THE RELATION OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY TO THE LOCAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The tax-supported public libraries in Iowa have been designated as official depositories for the publications of the State Historical Society of Iowa. These depositories serve as local collections of comprehensive material on the various aspects of Iowa history. The public libraries also maintain adequate general material on American and Middle Western History.

Whether the local historical society is housed in the public library building or elsewhere, it should find cooperative assistance in the library in any search for material on State and local history. Since the publications of the State Historical Society are free to these libraries, it should be possible for them to supplement

this collection with books and pamphlets bearing on the history of the local community and the State. The larger libraries will include the public documents of the State — executive department reports, House and Senate journals, State laws, Supreme Court reports, Official Register, etc.

The public library can also perform a valuable service in the field of local history by collecting and preserving materials relating specifically to the life and history of the community. It may include (1) files of local newspapers and periodicals; (2) official publications (city ordinances, school laws, and reports of county officers); (3) city directories; (4) announcements, programs, and proceedings of local organizations (literary, scientific, political, educational, fraternal, and religious); (5) books and articles by local men and women; (6) photographs of prominent citizens and local scenes; and (7) clippings relating to the life of the community. All these collections furnish valuable source materials which will amplify and supplement the work of the local historical society.

The following paragraphs taken from an article written in 1896 by Reuben Gold Thwaites, then Secretary of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, impressively

describe the mission of the public library in its relation to local history:

All librarians who have in charge such treasures are aware of the general popular interest in old pamphlets, newspaper files, and the odds and ends of printed matter issued in ephemeral form, provided they are old enough to have ceased to be commonplace. That with which we are all familiar is commonplace, and generally held in slight value; but the commonplaces of one generation are the treasured relics of the next. It is not mere idle curiosity, this interest of ours in the things with which our fathers were familiar. Relics in museums enable us more accurately in imagination to redress the stage of history; but the literary ephemera of other days, preserved in libraries, are still more valuable as mirrors of the past. The chance advertisement in the old newspaper, the tattered playbill, the quaintly phrased pamphlet, or musty diary or letter of a former time, mean more to the modern historian than any other form of historical record. In earlier days, history was thought to be simply the doings of monarchs and the conduct of campaigns; but Macaulay and Green have shown us that the history of the people is what benefits us most, — how John and Mary lived in their wayside cottage, how Peter and Paul bargained in the market place, how the literati toiled in Grub street, and seafarers journeyed over the face of the deep.

The other day Woodrow Wilson said, at the Princeton sesqui-centennial: "The world's memory must be kept alive, or we shall never see an end of its old mistakes. We are in danger of becoming infantile in every generation. This is the real menace under which we cower in this age of change." It is the office of the historian to keep the world's

munities. In fact, such local support of the endeavors of the State Historical Society is one of the essentials in promoting the cause of State and local history in the State.

PUBLICATION OF THE MATERIALS OF LOCAL HISTORY

Among the most active members of the local historical society are those who combine literary ability with historical interest. Such ability and interest should be sought and developed. Single articles or a series of stories on local history can be prepared for the local newspaper. Occasionally such writing will find avenues of publication in newspapers or magazines with wider circulation. Some of the material will be suitable for publication in historical magazines. The State Historical Society is always interested in an opportunity to examine such contributions, and many such stories have been accepted for publication in the Society's periodicals. Whether published or not, all such historical material can be preserved in the files of the local historical society or public library.

Printed or mimeographed leaflets can provide authentic information for the people of the community and the passing traveler. In the larger centers they can be made available

through chambers of commerce and public libraries.

SUGGESTIONS TO LOCAL HISTORIANS

The local historian will find it advantageous to prepare himself by the study of methods and techniques used by some of the masters of historical writing. Perhaps it would be well to begin with such a basic source as Channing, Hart & Turner's *Guide to the Study of American History* (Ginn & Company, 1912). This book is out of print but will doubtless be found in many of the public libraries in Iowa. Helpful guides to method will be found in Allen Johnson's *The Historian and Historical Evidence* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926) and in Homer C. Hockett's *Introduction to Research in American History* (Macmillan Co., 1931).

It is of primary importance that the historical writer should understand clearly the distinction between original and secondary sources of information. Original sources include all material preserved from the period under study — written or printed documents, survivals such as mounds and buildings, and relics in general. Secondary sources are historical writings based on original sources. The careful historian will consult original sources whenever they are available.

“Local history is not isolated; it is a part of State history — indeed, of national and world history. Local matters have to be tested by their relation to State history, and to still larger movements.”

“Above all things, the historian should keep himself scrupulously free from bias. To tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about the past, should be his religious duty. Particularly must he guard against careless or incorrect statements about the dead, who cannot defend themselves. Let the historian remember, too, that other investigators will, in due time, follow him; and that posterity is sure to weigh biased historical work in the balance, and find its writers wanting.”²³

²³ These paragraphs are taken from *Bulletin No. 12* of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, reprinted in *Bulletin of Information No. 4* of The State Historical Society of Iowa, p. 3.

CONSTITUTION AND BY-LAWS
of the
MADISON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Adopted March 14, 1904

CONSTITUTION

ARTICLE I

NAME. The name of this society shall be, "The Madison County Historical Society."

ARTICLE II

OBJECTS. This society is organized for the purpose of collecting and preserving books, papers and records, writings and relics, legal, military, political and other collections relating to the history of Madison county, Iowa, but may include such material as is illustrative of the history of the state and nation.

ARTICLE III

MEMBERSHIP. *Sec. I.* Any person residing in Madison county may become a member of the society when favorably recommended by signing the constitution and by-laws.

Sec. II. Any person making an absolute gift to this society of ten dollars in money, or historical matter of the value of ten dollars, in the judgment of the Board of Directors, shall become a life member of this society.

ARTICLE IV

OFFICERS. *Sec. I.* The officers of this society shall be a President, Vice-President, Secretary who shall also be Curator, Treasurer, a Board of Directors and a Corresponding Secretary in each township. The

Board of Directors shall consist of the President, Secretary and four members of the society.

Sec. II. All elections shall be by ballot unless the rule be suspended by a majority vote.

ARTICLE V

BOARD OF DIRECTORS AND STANDING COMMITTEES.

Sec. I. The affairs of the society shall be managed by a Board of Directors, subject to the provisions of the constitution and by-laws. All appropriations of the funds of the society shall be made by the Board of Directors, unless otherwise ordered by a majority vote of those present at any meeting of the society.

Sec. II. The society may provide for such standing committees as may be deemed necessary and assign them such duties as may seem expedient.

ARTICLE VI

MEETINGS OF THE SOCIETY. *Sec. I.* The annual meeting of this society shall be held on the third Tuesday in March of each year, at which time the officers shall be elected, and shall hold office until their successors are elected and qualified.

Sec. II. Special meetings may be held at the call of the President and Secretary.

Sec. III. Five members shall constitute a quorum for the transaction of business.

ARTICLE VII

ANNUAL DUES. The annual dues shall be as provided by the by-laws.

ARTICLE VIII

AMENDMENTS. The constitution may be amended by a majority vote of the members present at any stated meeting, provided a written notice of such amendment shall have been given at least thirty days prior to such meeting.

BY-LAWS

ARTICLE I

DUTIES OF OFFICERS. The duties of the officers shall be such as are indicated by their titles, and as may be provided by the constitution and by-laws.

ARTICLE II

ORDER OF BUSINESS. *Sec. I.* At each stated meeting the order of business shall be as follows:

1st. Reading of minutes of last meeting and all intervening meetings.

2d. Presentation of petitions, letters, memorials, or other papers which require action.

3d. Nomination and election of officers.

4th. Reports of committees and officers.

5th. Unfinished business.

6th. New business.

7th. Delivery of addresses and reading of papers.

8th. Adjournment.

Sec. II. This order of business may be changed at any meeting by a vote of a majority of the members present.

ARTICLE III

SECRETARY. *Sec. I.* The Secretary shall keep a book to be called a record or minute book, in which he shall transcribe in order (a) the constitution and by-laws of the society, (b) the record or his minutes of the proceedings of all meetings of the society after approval, and all other matter of which a record shall be ordered by the society.

Sec. II. He shall list, file and preserve, the original of all letters, papers, addresses and other material proper to be preserved, and shall have the care and charge of all books, papers and records, writings and relics of whatsoever kind and character, together with all other property which shall be kept as a department of the free public library of Winterset, Iowa.

Sec. III. The documents, papers and relics, shall be catalogued and arranged after the system in use in said library.

Sec. IV. He shall be held responsible to the society for the care and safe custody of all its said properties, and under no circumstances shall any person, whether officer or member, be suffered or permitted to take from its place in said library, any item or article of its property of whatever kind or nature, except by consent of the Board of Directors.

Sec. V. At each stated meeting of the society the Secretary shall report in writing the list of books, papers, relics, etc., that have been acquired by the society since the last stated meeting, and a list of all such books, relics, etc., that may have been lost since

the last stated meeting, with such information as he may have concerning the same.

ARTICLE IV

TREASURER. The treasurer shall collect and safely keep all the funds belonging to the society, and disburse the same only on the order of the Board of Directors, and he shall make a full report of the financial condition of the society at each annual meeting.

ARTICLE V

BOARD OF DIRECTORS. *Sec. I.* The Board of Directors shall constitute an executive committee having general management of the affairs of the society, and shall meet promptly on the third Tuesday of each quarter. Three members shall constitute a quorum to transact business.

Sec. II. They shall consider and determine what books, papers, records, writings, relics and other historical materials, shall be purchased for the society, and individually interest themselves with other members of the society, in soliciting contributions in money, and historical materials within the scope and purposes of the society.

Sec. III. No indebtedness shall be incurred by the Board of Directors, in excess of the amount in the hands of the Treasurer, not already appropriated, unless by the direction of a majority vote of the society, and before any bill for the purchase of books, papers, writings, relics, and records, shall be paid by the

Treasurer, it shall be signed by the President and countersigned by the Secretary.

ARTICLE VI

ANNUAL DUES. The annual dues of each member shall be fifty cents, payable on or before the third Tuesday in March of each year. No member shall be entitled to vote at any stated meeting, nor hold office, whose dues have not been paid for the year immediately preceding such meeting.

ARTICLE VII

AMENDMENTS. The by-laws of this society may be amended at any meeting by a majority vote of the members present.

ARTICLES OF INCORPORATION
of
CERRO GORDO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Adopted September 25, 1941

ARTICLES OF INCORPORATION

ARTICLE I

We whose names are hereto subscribed, being all citizens of the State of Iowa and of full age, do hereby associate ourselves together as a corporation not for pecuniary profit, under provision of Chapter 394 of the 1939 Code of Iowa and acts amendatory thereto.

ARTICLE II — NAME AND LOCATION

The name of this corporation shall be the Cerro Gordo County Historical Society, and its principal place of business shall be the City of Mason City, in Cerro Gordo County, Iowa.

ARTICLE III — OBJECTS AND PURPOSES

The purposes of this corporation shall be:

1. To kindle and keep alive an active interest in state and local history.
2. To promote interest in local history by publications, programs, observations and pageants of early pioneer history.
3. To discover, collect, and preserve books, pamphlets, messages, genealogies, portraits, paintings, relics, manuscripts, letters, journals, surveys, field notes, and any and all articles and materials which may establish or illustrate the history of this county, state or adjoining states.
4. To secure, preserve and publish the recollec-

tions and reminiscences of those who have taken part in or witnessed the growth of local communities.

5. To collect and preserve the materials of local history.

6. To promote the presentation and display of historical relics.

7. To ascertain and mark historical sites.

8. To see that the public archives of counties, cities, and villages are properly preserved.

9. To publish such historical matter as the society may authorize.

10. To cooperate as fully as possible with the work of the State Historical Society of Iowa and the Iowa State Department of History and Archives, and with such other agencies in the county, state, district, or nation as may be created from time to time, for the commemoration of historical events and preservation of historical records and the marking of historical sites.

11. To cooperate with other organizations whose objects are substantially the same as those of this organization.

ARTICLE IV — MEMBERS

The membership of this society shall consist of the incorporators and such persons as shall be elected to membership by the Board of Directors and shall pay the sum of \$1.00 which shall include payment of dues to the 1st day of the following January.

Annual membership fees of \$1.00 shall be due and

payable on the first day of January of each year, and a failure to pay the same within ninety days after written notice of such delinquency shall have been mailed to such member shall result in the termination of such membership.

Life memberships shall be conferred upon any member who has paid dues for ten successive years, or who shall pay an amount equal to the dues for ten years.

This society may confer honorary membership at its discretion by a vote of two-thirds of the membership at a regular meeting of the corporation.

ARTICLE V — CORPORATE POWERS

This corporation assumes to itself as such corporation, all the rights, powers, privileges and immunities conferred upon similar organizations under provision of Chapter 394 of the 1939 Code of Iowa and Acts amendatory thereto, and takes to itself the power to sell, hold, encumber, convey and dispose of property both real and personal in any manner not prohibited by law, and consistent with the objects and purposes of the corporation and necessary and convenient for the proper conduct of the affairs of the corporation.

ARTICLE VI — CORPORATE TERM

This corporation shall continue for a period of fifty years from the date of the filing hereof unless sooner dissolved by majority vote of all the members of this society, by act of the General Assembly, or by law.

ARTICLE VII — OFFICERS

The officers of this corporation shall consist of a President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, and Board of Directors, who shall be elected from the membership at the first annual meeting of the corporation and shall hold office for one year and until their successors are elected and have qualified. The secretary and treasurer of this corporation may be one and the same person.

The Board of Directors shall consist of from five to twenty-five members, together with the President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer.

Until the first meeting of this corporation, the following named persons shall constitute the officers and Board of Directors of said corporation:

Directors	Remley J. Glass, Pres.
R. A. Holman	Hugh H. Shepard,
Raymond L. James	Vice Pres.
Mrs. Hazel W. Knutson	K. I. Waughtal, Secretary
Mrs. D. A. Miller	and Treasurer
Mrs. Marion Markley Page	
E. R. Steinberg	

ARTICLE VIII

The Board of Directors shall have control over and manage the real and personal property of the organization and shall have charge of its financial and business affairs. They shall perform those duties usually performed by such a Board.

The Board of Directors shall have the right and power to employ a curator and such other officers as

they may deem necessary who shall hold office at the pleasure of the Board.

ARTICLE IX — VACANCIES

Vacancies in the officers or Board of Directors of this corporation shall be filled by the Board of Directors or the remaining members thereof and such shall hold office until the election and qualification of their successors at the next annual meeting of this corporation.

ARTICLE X

Contracts, deeds, conveyances, notes, or other evidences of indebtedness and mortgages securing the same shall be signed and executed in the name of the corporation by its president or vice president and secretary.

ARTICLE XI — MEETINGS

The first regular annual meeting of the corporation shall be held at 3 o'clock P. M. on the second Friday of May in 1942 in said city, at the office of the secretary of said corporation or such other place as may be determined by the Board of Directors and designated in notice of said meeting, and at a corresponding time and date each year thereafter. Special meetings of the corporation may be held at such places as may be determined by the Board of Directors and designated in the notice upon the call of the President, of the majority of the Board of Directors or upon the written request of ten of the members of said corporation.

Notice of regular annual meeting or special meetings of the corporation shall be given by posting the same in three public places in Cerro Gordo County, Iowa, one of which shall be at the door of the courthouse in said County.

Notice of special meetings shall set out the purpose and business to be considered and no other business shall be considered.

ARTICLE XII — QUORUM

Ten members of the corporation shall constitute a quorum to transact business for any regular or special meeting of the corporation.

ARTICLE XIII — BY-LAWS

By-Laws shall be adopted by the corporation and may be amended at any regular or annual meeting of the corporation or any special meeting called for that purpose.

ARTICLE XIV

The private property of any and all of the members of this corporation shall be exempt from any and all liability from the acts of the corporation or for any of its indebtedness.

ARTICLE XV — AMENDMENTS

These articles may be amended at any regular meeting or at any special meeting of the corporation called for such purpose by the affirmative vote of three-fourths of the members at the meeting.

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