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THE HISTORICAL VALUE OF NEWSPAPERS.*

BY J. B. CHANEY, ASSISTANT LIBRARIAN.

The historical value of newspapers is now acknowledged by all who are competent to give an opinion upon the subject. They contain the current history of the people of their respective localities, a history more complete than can be found in any other form. For the local or the general historian, they are invaluable; events and dates which are not recorded in any other place are therein easily found. To the compilers of the political, social and religious histories of a people, the newspaper files are veritable mines of information,—mines which are even now being eagerly and thoroughly worked, and with satisfactory results. With the aid of these, their tasks are, comparatively, light ones; and, for future historians, the value of our newspaper records will be still greater.

Could Herodotus, the "Father of History," as he has been called, or, in more recent times, Rollin, Gibbon, and other compilers of ancient history, have had files of newspapers to consult, their works might have contained very much more of truth, and much less of fiction,—to say nothing of the valuable time saved to them, and to their readers, alike.

WHAT OTHER LIBRARIES ARE DOING.

The British Museum has, for many years, given special attention to the collection and preservation of newspapers; by some authority possessed by that great institution, it can compel, under penalty, publishers to furnish it with a copy of every issue of their journal; and they are all carefully collated and bound.

*Read at the monthly meeting of the Executive Council, Feb. 10, 1896.

The great libraries of our own country, even some of the large Free Public Libraries, are making strenuous exertions to obtain and preserve files of their local and State newspapers. Of this last named class, the Boston Public Library is a notable example. It is, however, the peculiar province and duty of Historical Societies to engage in this important work, for the benefit of posterity. Their newspaper departments are not, or should not be, current newspaper reading-rooms; if they are so used, it will result in the defeat of the object sought to be attained, namely, the preservation of the newspapers, in good condition for binding. As every one knows, the paper now used, made of wood pulp, is so fragile that it will not bear much handling; often it is so poor that it will not go through the printing process without breaking.

Historical Societies, both local and state, should make special efforts to secure as full files as possible of all newspapers that are now being or ever have been published within their respective territories. A very few years hence it will be impossible to obtain files of their earliest papers, and it probably is so now in many cases of defunct ones. But few of the great libraries of the country, with abundant funds, can now secure files of papers published prior to, during, or soon after the Revolution, because few files of them were preserved as they were published. Excepting for the habit our ancestors had of saving everything that cost money, even their newspapers, very few, if any, files of them would have been preserved for this generation. It was, fortunately, their practice, as some of us remember, to religiously preserve their newspapers; and, where their second generation descendants did not wantonly destroy or sell them for "old papers," as so much rubbish, an occasional file finds its way to some library, and thus is preserved. Very few of them, however, have been so fortunate.

In an article on "Public Libraries of the United States," written some years ago, Hon. A. R. Spofford, Librarian of Congress, says:

The modern newspaper, and other periodical publications, afford the truest, the fullest, and, on the whole, the most impartial image of the age we live in that can be derived from any single source. Taken together, they afford the richest material for the historian, or the

student of politics, of society, of literature, and of civilization in its various aspects. What precious memorials of the day even the advertisements and local paragraphs of the newspapers of a century ago afford us! * * * * A public library is not for one generation only, but it is for all time. Opportunities once neglected of securing the current periodicals of any age, in continuous and complete form, seldom or never recur. * * * * In every city and large town, the local journals and other periodicals should form an indispensable part of a public library collection. * * * * The destiny of nearly all newspapers is swift destruction. * * * * These poor journals of to-day, which everybody is ready to stigmatize as trash not worth the room to store or the money to bind, are the every materials which the man of the future will search for with eagerness, and for some of which he will be ready to pay their weight in gold. * * * * And that library which shall the most sedulously gather and preserve such fugitive memorials of the life of the people among which it is situated, will be found to have best subserved its purpose to the succeeding generations of men.

In these days of ancestor-hunting and the compiling of local histories, what a storehouse of facts those old newspapers would have proved to be, were they now generally accessible!

THE "READY-PRINT."

Historically, the "ready-print," or "patent-side" country paper, formerly held in low esteem, has become a most valuable feature of modern journalism. The large establishments devoted to the supplying of the country press with ready-prints, and with "plate" matter, are now systematically conducted by experienced editors, and supply to the public reading matter covering the fields of history and science, as well as ordinary literature, thereby enabling the country press to give to its patrons not only the local news, but valuable general matter.

OUR OWN COLLECTION.

The collection of Minnesota newspapers in the vaults of this Society is considered, by those qualified to give an opinion upon the subject, to be really the most valuable portion of its excellent Library, historically speaking. It possesses a file of the first paper ever printed within the territorial limits of Minnesota, including a copy of the first issue of that first paper, "The Minnesota Pioneer." That first issue bears

date April 28, 1849,—some four weeks prior to the organization of the Territorial Government, which was proclaimed on June 1st, of the same year, by our worthy president, Hon. Alex. Ramsey, who was the first Territorial Governor. It also contains a copy of No. 1, Vol. 1, of "The Minnesota Register," a paper printed on a cylinder press in Cincinnati, Ohio, and shipped here in packages, for general distribution. This number was erroneously dated upon the outside, "Saturday, April, 27, 1849;" but that day of the month, in that year, happened to come on Friday instead of Saturday; however, as it was not printed in Minnesota, it does not matter when it was dated. Mr. James M. Goodhue is entitled to the credit of printing the first newspaper on Minnesota soil. It was printed on a hand-press, on Third street, St. Paul.

Unfortunately, our files of some of the early Minnesota papers are somewhat imperfect; but, such as they are, they are still almost invaluable, and none others are in existence, so far as we know. Many of those early papers died years ago,—many of them had but a brief existence; while they did live, however, they chronicled the current history of their respective localities, and they are, to-day, the only record of many of the passing events of those early days.

Considering the fact that, for the first eighteen or twenty years of the existence of this Society, it was practically without either home or funds, it is remarkable that it has been able to secure and preserve so many of the early newspapers. In this connection, it is but justice to say that this Society and students of history are indebted to Hon. Alex. Ramsey for the gift of a series of volumes of Minnesota newspapers, containing a large number of different publications, chronologically arranged and bound. They are of great historical value, and in many instances contain numbers that are wanting in the regular files. This miscellaneous series covers the period between April, 1849, and the end of 1861. Governor Ramsey also presented nicely bound files of the "Weekly Pioneer" and the "Weekly St. Paul Press," from 1862 to 1874.

NEWSPAPERS FROM OUTSIDE OF MINNESOTA.

Besides our own State newspapers, we have a valuable collection of prominent papers published in other States, mostly

obtained by purchase. Among them are "The Connecticut Gazette," running back to 1780, thus taking in the last three years of the Revolution; "The Centinel," of Boston, Mass., extending back to 1786; some Albany, N. Y., papers, published in the early part of this century; and a complete file of the "New Hampshire Patriot," from September 12, 1809 (the twenty-second issue of the paper), to December 26, 1855. This last named is an exceedingly valuable accession, covering, as it does, the war of 1812-15 and the Mexican war, besides all other important national events between those two dates. It was a gift by three members of the Society, W. H. Grant, Esq., Gen. J. B. Sanborn, and Judge Greenleaf Clark.

Of more recent journals, we have, among others, the "New York Daily Herald," from 1847 to 1877; this set covers the last part of the Mexican war and the entire periods of the Great Rebellion and Re-construction. The Herald was considered, at least by the Army of the Potomac, as the most reliable paper that came into camp; and it was sometimes sold for twenty-five cents per copy, when other dailies would not be taken for ten cents. We have the "New York Daily Tribune," full files, from 1859 to 1872; and the "Boston Daily Advertiser," from 1859 to 1866, both inclusive.

We have, also, a complete file of the "Semi-Weekly Southern News," published at Los Angeles, California, from January 18, 1860, to November 14, 1865. This file covers a very important period in the history of that State. It was an outspoken Union journal from the inception to the collapse of the Rebellion, and did good work toward keeping California from joining the seceding States. The set was presented to this Society by its good friend, Hon. C. R. Conway, one of its publishers, previously, and now, a loyal Minnesotan.

Last, but by no means least in historical value, we have "Harpers' Weekly," from 1858 to 1866.

Besides these regular files, we have a series of volumes composed of a large number of the prominent New York dailies chronologically arranged, covering the Rebellion period, which, in some respects, are as valuable as a complete file of a single publication, reflecting, as they do, the differing sentiments of able writers upon the same subject matter.

With our own State journals, added to the foregoing, and paying more particular attention to recording the movements and achievements of Minnesota men engaged in defending the Union during the dark days of the Rebellion, this Society is placed in the front rank of Libraries, in its facilities for the acquirement of a knowledge of that great struggle, on the one hand to destroy, and on the other to protect, the Nation's life.

Of daily papers published outside of Minnesota, which we are now receiving, may be mentioned the following: "The Chicago Daily Tribune," from 1878 (except from July, 1887, to February, 1891); "The World," of New York, since 1891; and the "San Francisco Chronicle," of California, also since 1891. From our neighboring State of Wisconsin we are, and for several years have been, receiving four journals, one of them a daily, free of cost. From Bismarck and the Black Hills, we have files of several of the early papers published there; and for the most of them the Society is indebted to its good friends, Col. C. A. Lounsberry and Capt. R. Blakeley. They are very valuable, historically, and it is doubtful that they can be duplicated.

From the Dominion of Canada, we are receiving three representative daily journals, one from Montreal, one from Toronto, and one from Winnipeg. For these we pay a nominal price, as also for those from New York, Chicago, and San Francisco.

ENGLISH NEWSPAPERS.

Of English newspapers, we have some of very great historical value, as "The London Gazette," from November 13, 1665, to July 25, 1713; it was a semi-weekly publication, and at first was called the "Oxford" Gazette, but soon changed the name to "London," as above. There was no display of "job type" in its columns, but it was filled with news (a little late, to be sure) from all parts of the world, including America. We have also "The London Chronicle, or Universal Evening Post," from January 1, 1757, to December 30, 1762. This was an eight page, and for some time a tri-weekly, publication; it, like the Gazette, contained the latest intelligence from all parts of the world, and is particularly valuable, in this coun-

try, for its information in regard to the last "French and Indian War," covering, as it does, all but the first eight and the last one and one-third months of that costly struggle. And last, but not least in historical value, of English journals in our collection, is the "London Illustrated News," from May 14, 1842, to December 26, 1874, sixty-five volumes, complete from its No. 1. This is an exceedingly valuable journal, historically, giving, as it does, illustrated articles upon the most important events in both war and peace in all parts of the world between those two dates, which, as to war, include our Mexican and Civil wars, as well as the Crimean war of 1854-56, and the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71.

RAPID INCREASE.

In the spring of 1887, less than nine years ago, the Society was in the more or less regular receipt of about seventy-five different newspapers; but, by systematic and persistent efforts, that number has been increased to over 340, and the list is still growing larger. We now lack only about seventy-five of having files of every regular newspaper published in Minnesota,—we ought to have all of them.

While the question of room in which to preserve our large series of newspapers, so that any desired volume can be supplied conveniently for reference, has already become a serious one, it is the plain duty of the Society to continue the securing and binding of them while they can be obtained, even if we are compelled to stack the increase during the next two or three years on the floor of its fire-proof vault. It would doubtless be impossible to get files of the present period at a future time, for very few people of the present age preserve their newspapers; in fact, but few publishers have more than one complete file (and some none) of their own publication, while that one file is liable to destruction at any time by fire or other cause.

A paramount duty of the Minnesota Historical Society, as expressed in its charter, is, the collection and preservation of publications, etc., pertaining to the social, political, and natural history of the state; and there is no class of publications that so nearly covers the entire field as do its newspapers.

PUBLIC APPRECIATION.

That the value of our newspaper files is appreciated by the people, at least by a large portion, is evidenced by the frequent and constantly increasing use made of them by all classes of our citizens,—not alone by citizens of the Twin Cities, but also by those of other parts of the State, as well. Scarcely a day passes in which some of them are not called into requisition. The student of our history, the clergyman, the lawyer, the politician, the laboring man, and even the editor, comes to consult them for specific information on some matter in which he is interested, and which could not be obtained elsewhere, frequently of great importance to him. Legal advertisements involving the title to real estate, probate notices regarding the settlement of estates, notices of meetings, proceedings of conventions, notices of marriages and deaths, etc., etc., are all searched for in these volumes. Each year added to their age enhances their historical and intrinsic value. In cases of the loss or destruction of court records, these files are the court of last and only resort.

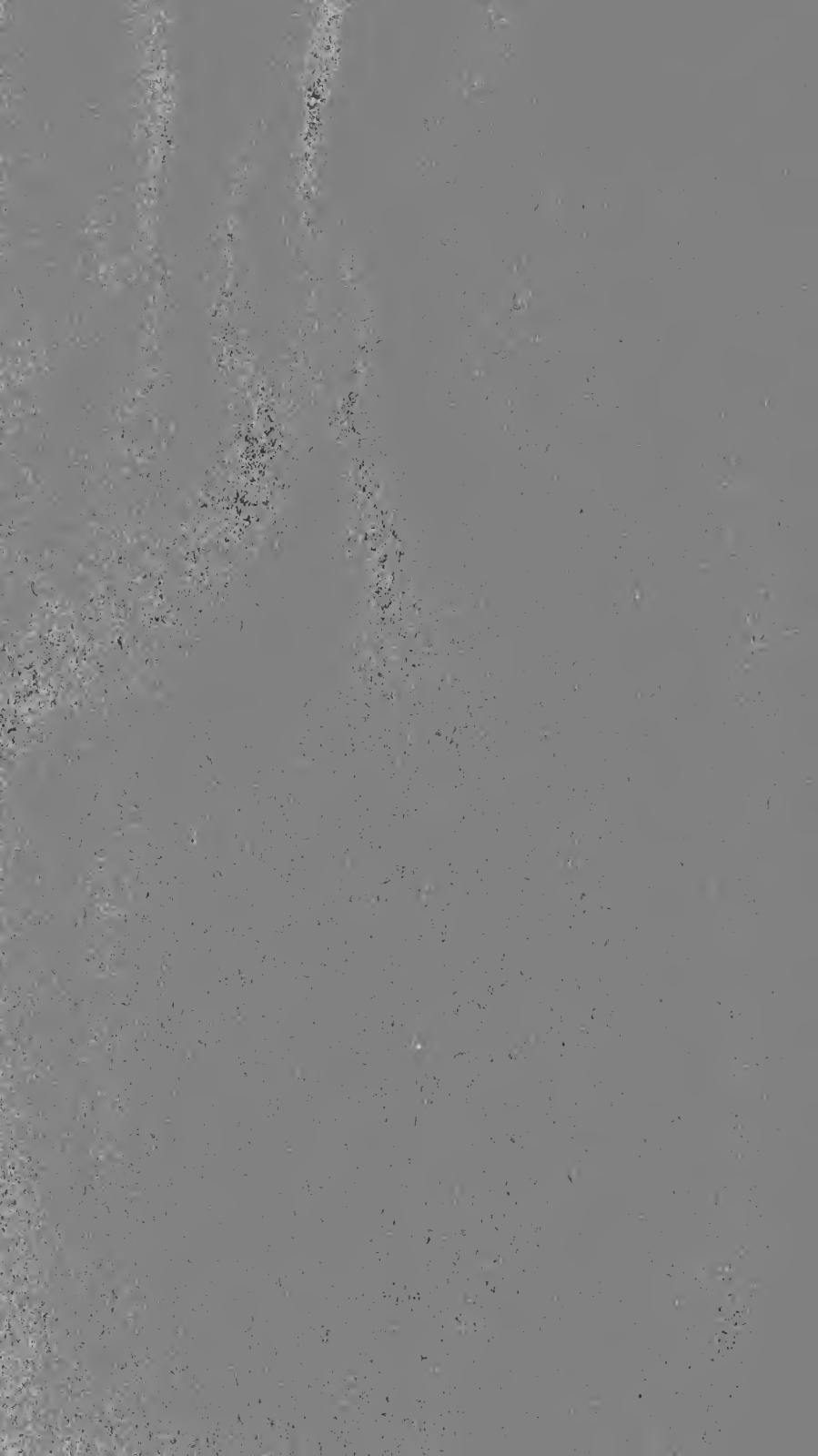
The Minnesota Historical Society may justly feel a pride in its magnificent collection of newspapers as a whole, and of its Minnesota papers in particular. It is highly complimented by all visiting librarians, historians, and others who are capable of appreciating its value. Many persons of eminence, in various fields of labor, have congratulated the Society upon its possession of such an invaluable collection of newspapers, containing, as they do, an almost complete history of Minnesota, from its first settlement by white people, of its marvelous growth in population and wealth, educational institutions, and all that goes to produce a grand and influential commonwealth, and a highly educated and prosperous people,—and these same newspapers were a large factor in producing this wonderful result in so short a period of time.

NUMBER OF BOUND VOLUMES.

January 1, 1877, the librarian reported 600 bound volumes of newspapers in the Society's collection. January 1, 1896, it had 3,239, an increase of 2,639 in nineteen years. It is now increasing at the rate of about three hundred volumes per year. The word volume, as we use it, has no reference to the news-

paper year of fifty-two issues, but to the bound book. Of a four-page weekly paper we put three years in one book; of an eight-page, two; of a twelve- or sixteen-page, one. The large daily papers, on the other hand, are bound usually in four or six volumes for each year.

The proper care of the 340 different journals regularly received, in re-folding, patching torn ones, keeping track of and sending for missing issues, collating at certain periods, getting them ready for binding, making labels with name and time covered in each book, examining them after their return from the bindery, putting in the book plates, entering them in the "Accession Register" by number, name, the time covered, and statement how they were procured (whether by gift or purchase), with any necessary marginal remarks in reference to their condition, etc., involves considerable labor and close application; but they are worth, historically, many times over, all the time, labor, and money they cost.



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