

A Historical Society is Formed in Lansing

Eugene T. Petersen

It is characteristic of many people everywhere to be interested in their local heritage. They don't refer to it as a heritage, but do think in terms of specific historical experiences that for one reason or another have impressed them deeply. Maybe it is respect and pride for an ancestor who struggled in the virgin wilderness to build a cabin in pioneer days. It could be a childhood remembrance of an Indian burial mound or some arrowheads found on the bank of a river. Sometimes it is a recollection of an exciting story told by a Civil War grandfather. Then again, it may be a sugar bowl handed down from a grandmother who had carefully brought it to a new home in Michigan.

These are personal experiences that have created awareness of local history at a grass roots level. It is also true that interest in local history can be aroused in outsiders who have moved into the community in recent years. Frequently they become more avid in their interest in the community's heritage than the natives. Then, too, there are the professional and amateur historians, who have a passion to explore history at the local level in manuscripts and books, usually because there is a physical contact possible or because of a conviction that American history has its origins there.

At any rate, there are many such individuals in any community who are tied together by this nebulous bond of interest in the past. The problem is to get them to work together and share their experiences and knowledge with others, and use these experiences as a springboard to further historical exploration. If they will meet regularly and adopt a constructive program, a good local historical society is assured.

That, then, was part of the thinking which led to the formation of the Historical Society of Greater Lansing in the spring of 1955. What follows is the story of the organization, activities, and plans of that historical society.

No one can say for sure exactly when the idea was conceived, but it was given great impetus in 1955 by two important historical cen-

tennials: Michigan State University celebrated 100 years as the first land-grant college; and the *Lansing State Journal* aroused local historical consciousness with its outstanding centennial edition in April. Perhaps as much for these reasons as any others, a committee consisting of Philip P. Mason, Birt Darling, and Eugene T. Petersen arranged for an organizational meeting on May 15. Alexis Praus, director of the Kalamazoo museum, served as the keynote speaker. Individuals known to have an active or passive interest in local history were personally contacted in the Greater Lansing area, and urged to attend this organizational meeting. John Gray of the state conservation department agreed to act as temporary chairman, and Miss Geneva Kebler of the Historical Commission's staff took notes.

The organizational meeting proved to be a success, but like honeymoons, organizational meetings usually are. Of the seventy-five persons who attended, a dozen or so formally or informally expressed their desire to participate in the group. Many of them made helpful suggestions as to the purposes and aims of the new society. Under the direction of Mr. Gray, a constitution, modeled after the constitution of the successful Kalamazoo society, was adopted. These Articles of Association stated that the purpose of the society was to "compile, collect and preserve" historical materials in the locality. At a subsequent meeting, which was also well attended, the constitution was adopted and a slate of officers elected. Professor Madison Kuhn of the history department of Michigan State University became the first president of the new group.

Thus, the framework for the new society was established, and we were off—but where to? Any society worthy of the name must have inspirational programs and a plan of activity. If the society is to be "Do you remember when?", then when there are no longer any people who do remember "when," the society dies. This characteristic, incidentally, is not peculiar to those who are three score and ten. My own generation, brought up in the depression and reaching manhood in the fox holes of Normandy and Iwo Jima, has a lot to reminisce about, and they usually do when they get together.

Fortunately, the Historical Society of Greater Lansing developed a general program of activities on a level designed to stimulate thinking on various historical subjects that were wide enough in their

scope to offer a sounding board to all who had ideas in this field. For those interested in writing, a professional writer who has published several books, Dirk Gringhuis, spoke at an early meeting on "Writing Historical Fiction—How Much History, How Much Fiction." Members who wanted to delve into manuscripts and newspapers heard Frank Scannell of the state library talk about the excellent collections available at that institution. At another meeting Raymond Darwin Burroughs of the conservation department spoke on "Adventure Unlimited, the Lewis and Clark Expedition."

And what about the hobbyists? In March, 1956, members were introduced to two collectors in the Lansing area: George Wisemann described and displayed his excellent collection of Michigan firearms and told about the activities of the Michigan Muzzle Loaders Club; Theodore Haskell enlightened members on his unusual hobby of making authentic historical miniatures to scale.

Another meeting was held at the Record Center, where Philip Mason and Lewis Beeson spoke of the theory and practice of historical records-keeping. Members at that time were invited to make use of the fine documents in the archives that touch upon every aspect of Michigan history. The annual meeting featured a talk by outgoing president Kuhn entitled "History at the Grass Roots." He urged local historians to be proud of their Michigan heritage, and to develop a consciousness that national and local history starts at the grass roots.

The trustees decided that the out-going president should give a talk at the annual meeting. This action was taken with a twofold purpose in view: to discourage people from taking the honor of being an officer of the organization without considering its responsibilities, and also to enliven the annual meeting.

Each program, it was felt, did much to stimulate historical thinking along various lines in the Greater Lansing area. But these fine programs are only the beginning. It is a paradox perhaps that if a historical society is to have a future, it must think as much about that future as it does about the past. In the Greater Lansing Historical Society, a questionnaire was distributed to each member asking which areas in local history were most interesting to him. A compilation of the answers was made and the president established committees designed to pursue constructive work in the respective

areas. Some of these are: locating and recording unusual types of local architecture, historical writing, genealogical compilations, construction of a historic map, marking and registering local historical sites, and locating historical collections of manuscripts and physical objects in the community. Work will continue on these subjects in the coming year, and reports will be given by respective committee chairmen. It is admittedly an ambitious program for the future.

A committee headed by Joseph Druse of the Michigan State University faculty and interested in family history has completed the copying of inscriptions on the stones in Bunker cemetery in Eaton County. This compilation will add to the records of the state library which heretofore has had no record of deaths in that county although it does have a record of Eaton County marriages. This year Mrs. Chalmers Monteith of Martin has compiled an index copy of the 1850 census of Eaton County which was done from the microfilm copy of the Federal Census of 1850.

Members feel that the past year has been a successful year. Attendance has numbered between forty-five and seventy-five at each meeting, and there are over one hundred fifty paid members to date. Meetings, which are held in the newly-constructed Civic Center auditorium, are announced through a newsletter entitled "The Local Historian." This modest mimeographed sheet also provides members the opportunity to see in print the results of their individual historical efforts.

It takes hard work to bring together individuals in a community who have an interest in the past. Someone has to attend to the administrative details that are necessary for a smoothly running organization. These include editing and typing the newsletter, reproducing and mailing it to members, appointing committees and seeing to it that they do the work they are assigned, arranging for speakers, getting new members and reminding the old ones to come to meetings, keeping membership lists in order, and worrying about whether the budget can stand coffee and cake at the meetings. Often, it is true, these responsibilities fall on too few members, but more often it just takes a little gentle prodding to transform a passive individual into an active and enthusiastic member; and I think that the satisfaction of seeing people work together for constructive ends far outweighs the administrative frustrations.

Local history is here to stay, and there is more of it all the time! Greater Lansing is rich in thrilling historical events. History is not something that is dead and that happened somewhere else; it is all around us. Here we can see the first permanent site of the state capitol, we can stand on prehistoric and historic Indian camping grounds in Chandler's marsh, we can look over the majestic Grand River that once accommodated pleasure boats on a Sunday afternoon. We can tour the state Historical Museum, which is a replica of Mount Vernon, and was built by a woman who came from a pioneering Lansing family and who wanted to spend the last years of her life like the Father of her Country. In the state capitol we can see the battle-scarred regimental flags of the Civil War. In front of the capitol we can see the statue of Austin Blair who as governor "gave the best years of his life" in Lansing during the Civil War.

From busy highway US-16 we can observe a spot which today is the site of a 65 m.p.h. speed-limit sign, but seventy-five years ago was the location of the first toll gate. We can close our eyes and imagine what it was like on April 26, 1898, when Company E marched proudly down Michigan Avenue on the way to the railroad station and Cuba. Twenty years ago, if we had looked to the sky, we might have been thrilled by a performance of Lansing's "bat-man"; Clem Sohn, who, flying like a bird on homemade wings of canvas, caught the attention of the aviation world.

This is the stuff of which local history is made, and when it is said that Greater Lansing is rich in historical heritage, what community in Michigan could not make the same claim?