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Expanding the Community Connection in Minnesota

Mark A. Greene

A full thirty years ago Rudy Vecoli, director of the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota, reminded archivists that “the portrayal of diversity has been an ideal to which we have paid lip service rather than a task to which we have addressed ourselves.”¹ Gradually, lip service paid to diversity within archival and museum organizations—whether it be a diverse staff or diverse collections or diverse exhibits—is

giving way to sustained and effective action. There is a large measure of enlightened self-interest driving this action; even for the relatively homogenous populations in the states of the upper Midwest, diversity is an increasingly important fact.

While Hispanics in Minnesota make up only 1.2 percent of the population, for example, their numbers increased 68 percent during the last decade—seven times the average population increase for the state. In Minnesota’s two largest cities, Hispanics, Blacks, and Asians are about 20 percent of the population and 45 percent of those cities’ school children. These demographic realities cannot be underestimated. As the director of another midwestern state historical society noted in 1991:

Those historical societies which rely on public support must face some dawning demographic realities. In 1995, black, Asian, and Hispanic eighteen-year-olds will outnumber whites of the same age in the United States.... Such ‘minorities’ will send larger delegations to the city councils, county boards, and state legislatures. In turn, these politicians—who may have little or no experience with historical societies and who may even regard them with hostility as bastions of an old white elite—will allocate public funds upon which public cultural agencies rely.²

Documenting diversity is not merely politically correct, not only something that is ethically right, it is also a political and social necessity.

How to achieve diversity, especially in states where the majority culture remains larger than 80 percent and dominates the administration of virtually all of the major cultural institutions, is not so clear as the imperative is to do it, however. This article will outline the evolution, purpose, and activities of the Minnesota Historical Society’s (MHS) Community Outreach Committee—the one part of the institution charged specifically with making connections to underrepresented communities. The article will also discuss the interrelationship among the society’s broad community outreach activities and two of its specific programs: collecting and exhibits. There is an interesting and important dynamic at work between these efforts that has some relevance to most historical societies and to many other repositories.

At MHS the term underrepresented or undocumented community refers in practice to the African American, Hispanic (or, as some prefer, Chicano/Latino), Asian Pacific, Native American, Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender (GLBT), or disabled community. The staff has gone around a few times on whether or not women should be included in this general term, but the fact is that by both accident and plan the society’s collections relating to women are dramatically broader and deeper than for any of these other communities. The society is beginning to wrestle with the question of whether the economically disadvantaged can and should be included in its conception.

The terms underrepresented or underserved communities were chosen in contrast to communities (or people) of color, since the GLBT and disabled communities are not “of color.” As of early 2000, MHS accepted and used in its official publications and communications both “Black” and “African American,” both “Native American” and “Indian,” both “Chicano/Latino” and “Spanish-speaking peoples”; in this, the institution was following the lead and advice of community groups as well as mirroring usage by the state government.
The Minnesota Historical Society has been experimenting since the 1960s, to varying degrees of consciousness and success, with several approaches to expanding its community connections. "As a largely white, mainline institution, founded by prominent descendants of European settlers, the Society's work reflected that reality for decades. As a socially responsible and responsive institution, its work has changed greatly in the last fifty years to reflect increased sensitivity to new interpretations of the past" and new relationships with Minnesota citizens of all backgrounds. That change in work became most apparent beginning in the 1960s but, until recently, had achieved solid success only in the society's development of a notable relationship with the Native American communities in the state. Ojibwa, Dakota, and Winnebago are the three largest tribes in Minnesota, respectively, living on eleven reservations as well as in all of the state's principal cities. All told, Minnesota has one of the largest Indian populations in the United States.

The society's modern connection with Minnesota's first peoples may be said to have begun in 1963 with its construction of a museum of Ojibwa culture at the Mille Lacs reservation. The first teaching unit developed by the society's education department in the early 1970s to shore up literacy in state and local history was a highly acclaimed unit on Ojibwa history, developed with the assistance of a committee of Ojibwa people who participated in every facet of its development. Similar committees were formed for the development of new interpretive exhibits at the society's three historic sites interpreting the Jeffers petroglyphs, the Lower Sioux Agency (a key site in the United States–Dakota conflict of 1862), and Grand Mound. Later, MHS staff and tribal leaders collaborated to launch two groundbreaking

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grants from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission to establish formal tribal archives at Mille Lacs and Red Lake. The connection was formalized in 1989 when the society’s executive council established a permanent Indian Advisory Committee to advise the society on every program that involved American Indian history.

The evolution of the society’s connection to the Native American community in Minnesota has not been replicable for other communities, however; three factors seem most salient in explaining this fact. First, of all the communities underrepresented in the society’s programs and collections, only with the Indian community did MHS have the nexus of historic sites to serve as a focus for clearly defined and long-term partnerships. Second, the existence of tribal governments meant that the society had a clear means of identifying people with authority to represent their communities. The tribal governments also provided the organizational structure necessary to conceive and implement national grant projects for tribal archives and tribal oral history programs. Third, it turned out that the formal, permanent connection the society has formed with Minnesota’s first people required an enormous amount of staff time and resources; similar resources have not been available to establish advisory committees from each of the other underrepresented communities.

Instead, the MHS connection to these communities—the Chicano/Latino, African American, Asian Pacific, GLBT, and disabled communities—has been less formal, less structured, and, until recently, much less substantial. During the summers of 1976 and 1977, the society directed two projects, funded by local foundations: one to document Black history, and one to document Mexican American history. The principal success of both projects was in conducting and transcribing several dozen oral history interviews, in acquiring a few manuscript collections and arti-
facts, and in making efforts to gather printed news and to con­tinue subscribing to the communities’ press. Because of the suc­cess of the oral history efforts, project staff conducted interviews in 1978 with the Issei (first generation immigrants from Japan) community of the Twin Cities and (connected to a major exhibit) between 1979 and 1982 with the state’s Chinese American com­munity. The most significant failing of these efforts was that the project directors were temporary employees, and after the grants ended the permanent staff made little effort to pursue leads the projects had generated or to build on the good will and visibility that they had won for the society.

Other programs at the society did not do very much ei­ther. The education department developed a curricular unit on immigration in the 1980s, but it did not then include substantive discussion of African American, Hispanic, or Asian immigrants. In 1981 and 1986 the MHS press published They Chose Minne­sota: A Survey of the State’s Ethnic Groups and The Minnesota Ethnic Food Book, respectively. The former contains commis­sioned chapters on the arrival in Minnesota of all its major eth­nic groups; the latter contains recipes traditional to most of the same groups. While both books have been quite successful, they reflect weaknesses. Mexican Americans were the only Spanish­speaking immigrants to receive mention, and the publication of both books preceded the major immigration of Southeast Asian families to Minnesota. While the books stand as evidence that the historical society had begun to embrace diversity, they are inherently static projects that did little to establish ongoing con­nections with minority communities.

Over the last ten years, however, staff members at MHS have created a bottom-up effort to improve the society’s rela­tionship with these communities, with minimal institutional sup­port and an infusion of volunteer effort. The context for this effort—and the administration’s willingness to sustain it eventu-
ally—was the sea-change occasioned by the society’s new History Center. The state largely funded the new building with the expectation that the end result would be a very public facility welcoming to all Minnesotans and a historical society providing public service far beyond the traditional confines of its members. The new building meant that certain society departments—especially exhibits and education—would finally have the physical capacity to mount massive programs that must (to justify their prominence in this building) draw not hundreds or thousands of people annually as in past years but tens of thousands of people. Perhaps, most significantly, the new building was new and seemed both to demand and justify taking a fresh look at the society’s mission and goals.

It would take until late 1991 for these changes to be reflected formally in the society’s official priorities, but practical change began before then, due in large measure to initiatives by new staff members. The new public programs coordinator in the education department received funding in 1990 to begin what was then called “minority programming,” which led in part to the first society efforts to schedule events specifically tied to Black History Month and other official commemorative celebrations. The new assistant director for museum collections began an abortive attempt to create a permanent Hispanic advisory committee as one step toward ensuring that the exhibits being planned for the new building would be appropriately diverse. The author had arrived at the society a few months earlier as curator of manuscripts and had begun, in tandem with Marcia Anderson and the museum collections department, to increase solicitation efforts in communities of color. The MHS research and publications department was actively expanding its titles related especially to the African American community and was looking to improve its marketing. Also interested in getting ahead of the diversity curve, the new head of public relations was actively trying to
raise the profile of the institution in underserved communities in advance of the new building.

An ad hoc staff committee, in 1990, representing the acquisitions and curatorial department, the museum collections department, the education department, the publication department, and the public relations office came together for the purpose of coordinating and improving the society’s efforts to raise its visibility in and to strengthen its relationship with communities of color. At the outset the committee’s strategy was simple: to establish a society presence at ethnic community festivals, such as Cinco de Mayo, Juneteenth, and others representing more purely local traditions. A 1991 internal memo set forth the objectives of the committee:

1. To make the society more visible and accessible to communities of color, by coordinating the establishment of a personal physical presence in those communities at major community events and festivals—this presence will include staff knowledgeable about collections, historic sites, education and exhibit programs, and publications;

2. To encourage membership in MHS and to present information about the breadth of MHS programs (education, publications, historical preservation, historic sites, research collections, exhibits) and their relevance or accessibility to communities of color; and

3. To listen to and learn from the communities—to gather information and establish contacts that may assist us to add to MHS collections and make exhibits more inclusive.

The committee’s mission and objectives have evolved somewhat over the intervening years. The essence, however, remains the goal of dispelling, through its presence in the commu-
nities, the conception of MHS as a high-society, exclusive, establishment organization with no interest in and nothing to say to anyone who was not wealthy, highly educated, white, Protestant, and heterosexual. What this meant in practice was that committee members begged money from their various department heads to rent booth space at community festivals. Using, in the beginning, borrowed table cloths and borrowed signage (the committee’s first identification banner read “Minnesota Historical Society Publications,” the last part of the sign had to be folded out of the way), the original group of volunteers and a few other interested souls gave up parts of various Saturdays to sit in the sweltering sun and the pouring rain, to smile and talk, to try to keep the committee’s stacks of literature from blowing away or getting soggy, and generally to try to be approachable and friendly.

In 1991 an effort to achieve formal recognition for what became the Community Outreach Committee was partially successful; the administration recognized the committee as doing officially sanctioned society work but failed to allocate any funding. Still, grass roots efforts can achieve a lot. Essential in both the external and internal success of the committee was the fact that its membership quickly broadened to include volunteers from the MHS historic sites, state historic preservation, membership, exhibits, reference, cataloging, and human resources departments. Staff members from these departments who peopled the booth at community festivals—always on a Saturday or Sunday—did so as volunteers, without any compensation or compensation time.

Moreover, the committee members—only a few of whom were department heads themselves—were remarkably successful in begging funds from their departments toward the outreach effort. For example, the education department used some of its money to purchase display racks and other tabletop supplies for the committee and loaned a staff person to provide craft activities for the kids. The public information office paid for booth
space and the first banner. The head of the acquisitions and curatorial department agreed to underwrite the cost of having brochures printed that described the society’s collections relating to the Hispanic, African American, and Asian communities, and solicited donations. The museum collections department put funds into preparing notebooks containing photos of community-specific artifacts in the collections. The effort was definitely low budget, but it seemed to be worthwhile.

In 1994 the committee hit two milestones. First, despite some opposition within the committee, it added the Gay Pride celebration in Minneapolis to its list of regular festivals. Second, the author, who had chaired the committee since its inception, asked to be relieved of leadership though remaining on the committee. The process of selecting new co-chairs evolved into a process of granting more official status and structure to the committee, and within a year the co-chairs were able to leverage a real budget for the committee from the administration. That budget (never more than two thousand dollars) has allowed the committee to purchase more professional equipment and supplies for the booths, to pay for the presence of costumed historical interpreters at some of the festivals—a tremendous draw—and to attend occasional festivals outside the metro area.

In addition, the committee began to play a more active role within the walls of the History Center—not only setting up informational booths at on-site events but also serving as a formal clearinghouse of information on diversity projects within the institution, assisting in the development of diversity training for staff, and lobbying for a revision of the society’s policies on decorating the building for religious holidays. The committee also hosted an open house for the GLBT community and helped provide the contacts that the education department needed to put together a GLBT history program in the MHS auditorium in 1996. The main activity of the committee does continue to be its pres-
ence at community festivals. Though the effort has relied on fairly primitive supplies and techniques, the objectives have depended less on polish than on the presence of staff members themselves.

What has this presence in the communities accomplished? The answer is unclear. There is abundant anecdotal evidence to suggest that there have been results, even if they have not been the ones the members of the committee anticipated and are nearly impossible to measure. The committee’s efforts have changed many people’s perception of the historical society. During the first couple of years at any festival, the typical reaction of community members who stopped by the booth was “I didn’t expect to see the historical society here” or “How wonderful to see you folks here.” Clearly, many African American, Hispanic, and GLBT citizens assumed the society would never show up in their neighborhoods or at their celebrations. The staff found that most of the people with whom they spoke, especially from the Black and Chicano/Latino populations, had not been to the History Center—many did not know where it was—but were happy to take maps and brochures and intrigued to learn that there were vast exhibit halls. Others spent many minutes perusing the photos or artifacts in the notebooks, called over friends to see a particular image, and asked the staff about other material MHS might have on their community. Some found that the MHS research center was a place for them to begin genealogy—something they would not have known had society staff not been at their festival. Generally, these community members now see MHS as a bit less “them” and a bit more “us.”

On the other hand, some of the expectations for the Community Outreach Committee and the effort to build connections through it have not been met, at least directly. Part of what prompted the decision to attend the festivals was the assumption that outreach work would lead to collection acquisition; this is
initially what drove the museum collections and acquisitions and curatorial departments to expend funds on this effort. Evidently, the committee was doing the right thing for the wrong reason. The committee’s presence over five years at community festivals resulted in very few donations (although the museum collections department has taken the opportunity to purchase many items from the vendors at the festivals). However, donors or prospective donors that acquisitions staff had identified through “traditional” channels (such as newspaper stories) saw MHS at the festivals and were delighted to know that the society’s interest in their community was broad and genuine. Moreover, it seems to be true in that acquisitions staff had to spend less time, when talking to prospective donors, justifying the society’s interest in them or their community, because the evidence of that interest and commitment was now more visible and accessible.

Also of some disappointment is the committee’s still nascent ability to serve as an internal clearinghouse to minimize conflict and confusion in helping individual MHS departments to coordinate outreach activities. Conflict and confusion are very real dangers in this endeavor for several reasons. While virtually every department in MHS has some direct reason for engaging in outreach activities, department-specific initiatives often compete against one another in the battle for resources and support from the administration. This competition reinforces the tendency to embark on projects or make contacts without a second thought to other MHS departments that might reasonably have an interest or concern. Also, the society’s constituents do not (and should not be expected to) understand the bureaucratic dynamics of MHS. Unsurprisingly, constituents are confused and sometimes irritated when the staff member they are dealing with for, say, a public program, cannot answer questions about donating collections or when they receive two completely uncoordinated calls from the curator of manuscripts and a museum collections curator, both
seeking a donation. Competition and lack of coordination among departments merely exacerbates the risk of such confusion. The outreach committee has undertaken some important initiatives to minimize these problems, including a survey of every department’s outreach activities, but much remains to be done.

Specifically, there remains an ongoing, and perhaps irre­mediable, tension between the work and goals of the collections staff and the work and goals of the exhibits staff. This tension has several nexuses, among which are the following: 1) exhibits, even “permanent” exhibits, are relatively short-term projects (there is a deadline, a fixed goal) whereas successful collection building is long-term, indeed continual; 2) exhibits can make community connections by borrowing artifacts and other mate­rial for the short-term, whereas collection building (as practiced by most modern museums and archives) rests on donation and thus on the establishment of a permanent commitment by both parties; 3) exhibits of necessity focus on interesting, unique, or even typical “items” whereas collection building rests, as the name denotes, on “collections”; and 4) exhibits, to be successful, must be narrowly focused (thus MHS had an exhibit not on Hispanics in Minnesota, but on St. Paul’s lower West Side; not on African Americans in Minnesota, but on the barber shop as a community gathering place), collections—because they are meant to sup­port broad ranging research—must be at once broader, deeper, and more complex. There are other tensions, to be sure—not to mention tensions between other departments—but these will suf­fice for the purpose of this discussion.

These tensions cannot be eradicated, but they can be amei­liorated. Seeking loans of individual items and donations of en­tile collections are not mutually exclusive; seeking items may uncover collections; and acquiring collections may mitigate the need for some borrowing. Nor must the shorter-term relation­ships needed for exhibits conflict with the longer-term relation-
ships built with donors. By the very focused nature of defining and seeking community support for exhibits, exhibits staff will often establish close relationships with community representatives whom the collections staff have either not been able to identify or not been able to devote the time to contacting and nurturing as potential donors. Collections staff, on the other hand, may have already established relationships with donors in the community who can be effective partners in the exhibit process. Obviously, for such success, the collections and exhibit staffs must work together and be educated about and committed to each other’s goals.

Both exhibits and collections programs are vital to MHS as they are, presumably, to most historical societies. How to mesh the two comfortably and effectively is a secret the society staff have not yet fully uncovered, but one which they must discover if they are to make successful connections as a whole institution with underserved communities. The Community Outreach Committee, one of the society’s first broadly representative committees, provides one possibility for improving coordination and communication internally so that the staff can work more effectively externally. It provides the varied departments and programs at MHS with the challenge and necessity of at least one common activity and goal relative to building community bridges. For museums and historical societies that wish to remain relevant and accessible in the twenty-first century, building community connections is essential.

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