A Report on The Stearns County, Minnesota Biographical Sketches

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A Report
on
The Stearns County, Minnesota Biographical Sketches
November 1983

by

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Introduction

My intention for this project was to do a comprehensive study of the Stearns County Biographical Sketches. My objective was two-fold: I wanted to find out if the sketches were of value beyond genealogy and I wanted to find out if they contained primary resource material that individuals might use in Stearns County local history studies.

After studying just a few of the sketches I realized I needed to do a short genealogy of the sketches themselves. I began with the grandfather of the sketches, the WPA Project itself. From there I descended to the FWP, the WP, and then the local WP, the work that was done in Stearns County.

Having learned the lineage of the sketches, I was able to do a quantitative study of them, followed by a case study.

I chose agriculture as my case study because I wanted to find out if farmers talked about their own lives and work or did they really feel their lives not important enough to be talked about, as I have often read in scholarly literature. The WPA sketches are unpublished, local history documents written by relief workers during the Depression about "common" people. Farmers, I have come to believe, are considered "common" people. They have not often been written about in history beyond historical novels.

The WPA Biographical Sketches are Americans talking about America. I found my answers.
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The WPA

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was created in 1935 by the Federal government, by executive order of Franklin D. Roosevelt, to provide useful public work for unemployed persons. Because of the Depression beginning in 1929, all levels of government--Federal, state, and local--intensified efforts to relieve the distress caused by unemployment. The WPA was the principal program designed to utilize the skills of the unemployed to operate projects yielding substantial benefits in the form of public improvements and services and to integrate its operation as closely as possible with the labor market. It was to restore self-respect to many of the eight and one half million individuals it employed at one time or another.

In 1939, the Works Progress Administration was renamed the Works Projects Administration (still WPA) and placed under the Federal Works Agency. Its projects were many: Airports, public utilities, and recreational facilities were built or improved; 78,000 bridges were built; women worked in sewing, gardening, and canning, and school lunch programs were initiated; the National Youth Administration, supervised by the WPA, found part-time work for millions of young people; adult education classes were conducted. An art project produced paintings, drawings, sculpture, and more than 2,500 murals in public buildings. A theater project developed dramatic new theater techniques, and thousands of musical groups gave performances. Writers were put to work under the FWP to "rediscover America."
The WPA was in operation for eight years. It employed about 8,500,000 individuals at a total cost of eleven billion dollars. The average monthly wage for individuals was about $54.33. More importantly, the WPA was a program of relief that showed considerable understanding of the human problems involved. Jerry Mangione, a former worker for the WPA, said, "For the great majority of Americans the years of the Depression were a waiting period, a time for marking time until things got better. For most of the Project workers the sense of waiting was not as acute."

As World War II became a reality, the WPA aided the national defense effort with construction of military installations. Ironically, the war brought about increasing employment and on June 30, 1943, the WPA was terminated.
The FWP and WP

The Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was one of the many projects under the WPA. It was a project designed to put professional people to work writing and researching America. The production of state guide books, tour books explaining the points of interests in each of the forty-eight states, was the primary objective of the FWP.

Shortly after the inception of the program, however, politics and personality became major characters in this drama of rediscovering America. The creative writers involved in the Projects wanted the project to provide "an antithesis to the widespread obsession with politian writing that dominated the literary atmosphere of the Thirties."\(^1\) They didn't want to write about what was wrong with the country; they wanted emphasis placed on simply talking to the Americans about America. They hoped to somehow enhance the nation's culture with socio-ethnic studies of America while the nation's immigrants were still alive and the FWP, as a nationwide fact gathering agency, could accomplish this...

Without the misleading tinsel of prosperity, with the country ripped at the seams by the impact of the Depression, the variegated parts of America became more visible; and these writers understood the country as they never had before. They saw, for the first time, that the population did not live solely under the influence of the Protestant ethic, with its inhibiting bourgeois vision, but it was a mixture of different groups—Negroes, Irish, Italian, German, Russian, among others—all interacting with one another in the struggle for survival and assertion and in the process, generating their own special kind of influence.\(^2\)

The guide books were stumbling blocks for the creative writers.
They felt too much time and money was spent on fact-finding and "academic accumulating" for guide books. Moreover, once the program was underway, almost any person on relief who could write English was eligible to work for the project. James McGraw, one of the project's chief executives, wrote: "I don't want to be discouraging, but I am very much worried by the probability of getting a lot of research material which will be no good to the American public, and which will get no publishers..." He, too, was concerned about incompetency and lack of help in other areas.

To make matters worse, the directors of the projects on the state level, the WP, could not agree on one distinct program. There were personality clashes--Morton W. Royce initiated a "Composite America" study, but the regional director in the South regarded that study an infringement on his own oral-life history project and would not cooperate. In other areas of the country other studies were going on--a copper study in Montana and a Bohemian ethnic study in Minnesota, for example. And, there was constantly the gloom of the Depression hanging over the workers.

Unfortunately, the WWP was too short-lived to complete many of the studies begun during the seven and one half years of the Writers' Project. The total cost of the project was $27,000,000. More than 400 publications were written, some published, and a state guide book for each of the forty eight states was published. Many of the manuscripts are held in the United States Library of Congress, more are in the National Archives, and many of the state materials are in state historical societies, universities, and public libraries.
Although an admittedly large amount of money was spent on seemingly few publications, it must be remembered that community and state agencies would have been obliged to pay this money out in welfare funds if destitute writers had not been provided jobs. The FWP did ease the tension and soothe the feeling of helplessness that unemployment during the Depression caused.

The following is a poem written by H. J. Norris, an old man who had worked in the Omaha office of the Nebraska Project until 1939 when a changeover from Federal to state control resulted in drastic cutbacks in the Writers' Project. Norris was cut. The dismissal notice was called a Four-O-Three.

**THE FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT**

What a record they carved  
After coming half-starved  
To work on the F.W.P.  
They were not much for looks  
But they put out good books  
While waitin' for the Four-O-Three

They were busy as bees  
Though not always at ease  
When they wrote of the things they would see  
For over them hung  
As their pencils swung  
The Sword of the Four-O-Three

They worked and they moiled  
And their clothes got soiled  
Out researching what they could see  
They got sun-burned and tanned  
While a-waitin' for their Four-O-Three

There were shy ones and bold ones  
There were hot ones and cold ones  
And there was only one old one—and that's me  
There were none that were lazy  
Though some went nearly crazy  
While a-waitin' for their Four-O-Three.
Although not a literary masterpiece, Norris' poem is an emotional narrative of what he felt was ambitious work. Norris certainly thought the work was worthwhile: "They put out good books," he writes. And, "They wrote of the things they would see." America in the atmosphere of the thirties, exactly what the professional writers on the project hoped to capture. Further, he says they went nearly crazy waiting for their Four-O-Three, their dismissal notice. He would rather work on the FWP than be on relief.

Simple poems like Norris' about people of the Thirties "all interacting with one another in the struggle for survival and assertion..." give us an honest picture of the life of the American working class.

Very possibly, the material that evolved out of the FWP and the WP that did not get published contains valuable chapters of the American story that had been overlooked until recently. Glanville Smith, a central Minnesota historian, wrote in 1956, "An affectionate interest in its own past--this is a sign of maturity as a community develops." Studies of the WPA Writers' Project on the local level are tools which will aid in discovering the maturity of America and how it developed.

For many years scholars thought the FWP was a dismal failure because much of the written material did not get published. It was shelved and forgotten. Since the 1970s, however, according to Jerry Mangione, history has been taking a second look at the work for cultural literature, like the poem above and other local studies:

More and more, the Writers' Project, along with the other arts projects, is being discussed at scholarly conferences and in classrooms dealing with American studies. Lately, a number of graduate students have chosen some aspect of the subject as the theme for their dissertations and have been digging into its story with the eagerness of gold rush prospectors.
Minnesota Publications of the WP or FWP

Blue Earth County. (FWP) St. Paul, 1938. Mimeographed. Wrappers, 60 pp. (Minnesota County Histories Series)

The Bohemian Flats. (WP) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1941. Cloth, 52 pp. 1,000 numbered copies.


Stearns County WPA and WP

Fifteen hundred and twenty-nine biographical sketches written as part of the Stearns County Writers' Project under the WPA are housed in the Central Minnesota Historical Center, St. Cloud, Minnesota. These biographies were compiled by WPA workers in the late 1930s as part of the Historical Records Survey. The collection was given to the CMHC by the Stearns County Historical Society in the late 1960s.¹

The Stearns County Biographical Sketches came into existence when, in 1935, $12,000 was made available for wages for individuals who would assist in collecting and gathering historical data, if a responsible society would sponsor their work. Alvah Eastman, then editor of the St. Cloud Daily Times, Dudley S. Brainard, and Dora Perry of St. Cloud Teachers College, and Harold Schoelkopf of the Times formed committees that brought about the Stearns County Historical Society—the organization to sponsor the study. It was formally organized in March 26, 1936.²

The Carter Building in St. Cloud became headquarters for the SCHS, a local history museum. Artifacts of past history of the county were collected and labeled, and under the supervision of Marjory D. Carter, the historical research was begin. A staff of workers was hired from the relief rolls of Stearns County, individuals who were capable of more than "mere pick-and-shovel tasks."³ They were hired according to qualifications. Some of these workers went out into the country to talk to older pioneers. They gathered biographical information and wrote reminiscences of early pioneer life form these interviews. Those workers less experienced in writing took notes and others on the project.
did the actual writing. Some did the typing; others searched court house records, documents, census files, and newspapers for information; some worked at labeling and collecting artifacts. A keen interest in county history was the only real requirement.  

A number of workers were assigned to the St. Cloud area, one to write a history of the St. Cloud business district; two workers were assigned to Sauk Centre, the second largest city in the county; and one individual was assigned to Albany, one to Richmond, one to Melrose, and one to Paynesville. Names of pioneers to interview were obtained from the project supervisor, from local pastors, parish records, from court house records, from local residents, and often the interviewee knew the people in the specific town assigned to them.  

In 1939, Art Plantenberg of Richmond was appointed supervisor of the WPA Project. By this time the project was well underway and his enthusiasm encouraged the workers, a paid staff of twenty-two, to continue gathering biographies, type and attach legal records, and attach copies of 1860 census records to the biographies. They copied obituaries and articles of historic interest from early newspapers, letters, and other historical documents. They compiled histories of transportation, education, logging, agriculture, and industrial activities, collected historical photographs, indexed the St. Cloud Daily Times, collected items for museum display, and set up a museum in the basement of the Stearns County Court House where the public could view the artifacts and read the historical documents.  

Art Plantenberg, as supervisor of the Project, said that, except for one or two of the workers, they were "fired up about the project"; it was "like giving them a rainbow" when he hired them. Art himself went to talk to commercial clubs and other civic groups throughout the county to make people aware
of local history and possibly get donations for the project. The Stearns County Commissioners, fortunately, were interested in preservation and furnished office space and supplies.

According to Plantenberg, the WPA Project was very successful in Stearns County. People were interested in preserving the history of the county; however, like many other WPA projects, interest withered away as the United States became involved in World War II. Current history, guns and uniforms, and jobs replaced old pioneers' reminiscences and spinning wheels in local history museums.

In 1942, the SCHS space in the court house was needed for a Civilain Defense Committee. The exhibits were packed into a corner and curtained off. A mere skeleton crew kept the almost dormant organization alive for many years and the WPA sketches were ignored.

Fortunately, in 1983, the SCHS is flourishing. A grand new heritage center in west St. Cloud is its headquarters. Copies of the WPA sketches are located in the genealogy files there and the collection as a unit is housed in the CMHC.
Stearns County Biographical Sketches

The Stearns County Biographical Sketches were part of the Historical Records Survey of the New Deal under the WPA. The majority of them were based primarily on interviews conducted during the years 1936, 1937, 1938, and 1939. Some, however, were copied from books written previously: *Minnesota Biographies, History of the Upper Minnesota Valley, History of the Great Northwest,* and *In the Northwest*; from local newspapers: *Sauk Centre Herald, Broten Review, St. Cloud Times,* and *St. Cloud Times Journal*; and from data copied from Census and other records in the Stearns County Court House.

For this study, I did not use those sketches that were copied. I used only those that were written after personal interviews, the vast majority of them.

At first glance, the sketches appear to be merely a jumble of genealogical data. Name, birth date, and place of birth appear first. Then a reminiscence of some aspect of life as pioneers in Stearns County follows and/or a list of children, their birthdates, maybe where the children reside at the time of the interview. Deaths are often mentioned. The name of the interviewer, the date, and the interviewees name close the sketches. Usually, but not always, this is followed by attached census and court house genealogical data. Sometimes a reinterview completes the collection of papers.

The reinterview was done to verify court house records against personal data because, as Art Plantenberg said, many times the dates and/or names in the court house did not match. He said doctors or whoever sent the data to the court house did not always make accurate records. "Old timers said doctors were too busy to enter records correctly. Sometimes they put down the date
when the report was made out as the baby's birthdate and if the baby's name was forgotten, it was entered as 'baby girl' or 'baby boy'. In a number of cases births were not even reported or recorded. There are no legal records of these people ever being born.

An example of a good sketch is the John Fred William Arndt sketch (B-30). John's reminiscences give detailed information about his life beginning with his emigration from Germany through his years in Stearns County--five pages. Then there are four pages of genealogical data copied from court house records, followed by a reinterview three months after the first interview. Other sketches are less informative. The Mrs. Katherine (Kinsella) Collins sketch (B-244) is considerably less complete than Arndt's. It has less than one page of reminiscences and only one and one half page of court house data and follow-up, with no reinterview. The Nicholas Niehaus sketch (B-962) is another type. It has only reminiscences with no court house data and no re-interview. The entire sketch is two pages long. Some are only one page. The LeRoy Working sketch (B-1500) has excellent reminiscences touching on numerous topics but has little genealogical data.

Generally, the sketches all follow patterns similar to these four. Some contain specific details about certain aspects of pioneer life and others are brief with only family lineage noted. A few are up to twelve pages long and others are one page long.

As genealogical documents I feel the sketches are valuable. They are historical literature that evolved out of the WPA program and the Depression. They may be used as primary source material in family histories. In many cases they contain information that could not otherwise be resurrected because the people who lived those lives have long since passed away and the things they
talked about would be lost forever.

The sketches may be photocopied and inserted in family histories. The major shortcoming of the sketches is the fact that the interviewees were selected at random. Many families in Stearns County were not represented in the interviews. For them the WPA sketches are a dead end. On the other hand, if a person does not find his/her own surname in the sketches, s/he may find relatives that give information about his/her life and ancestors that may be relevant to other relatives.5

Surprisingly, although the interviews were conducted during the Depression, I found only three that talked about the Depression as a difficult period in time and very few of the sketches carried a negative tone.

Genealogy aside, I did a quantitative search of the sketches to see what else the sketches would reveal. My hypothesis was that whatever the interviewees talked about most often must be most important in their lives at this time. This would also make a statement about this period in history. After glancing through a number of sketches, I came up with ten topics: Farming, religion, education, natural disasters, occupation, shelters, Indians, railroads, military, and the trip to Minnesota.6

It must be remembered that the interviewers were asked to gather genealogical information and reminiscences of past pioneer life in Stearns County. I do not know if they asked any specific questions. A few of the sketches suggest it with statements like this: "when asked about..." Therefore I assume some questions may have been asked. Conversely, many do not reveal anything about any of the topics I chose. Furthermore, the person conducting the interview may have had some sketches that were lengthy and detailed while others were terse and short. I found virtually no patterns beyond genealogy.

13
Similarly, I did not find that certain nationality groups were favored. When compared to census reports from that period in Stearns County, the nationalities run comparable to the number of individuals from each group that resided in Stearns County in the Thirties.7 (See Graph I and Graph II)

The county was still a county of immigrants during the Thirties. Sixty-two percent of those interviewed were born in foreign countries, thirty-eight percent were born in America, and twenty percent were born in Minnesota. Twenty-five percent of those interviewed, whether they were immigrants or American born, had lived in other states before coming to Minnesota.8

As a random selection for the quantitative study, I selected every third folder in the collection, 453 sketches. I divided them into four groups to simplify statistics and compilation. None of the interviewees talked about all of the topics I selected and a great number didn't talk about any of them, some talked about one or two of them and, generally, the very short sketches did not contain any reminiscences, only genealogical information or copied data. (See Graph III)

In many of the sketches the person interviewed was not the person listed at the heading of the sketch. Often a son or daughter reminisced about his/her parents. As a rule, if a woman's name headed the sketch, her maiden name was placed in parenthesis with her married surname, but not always. A few have only "Mrs. Knott" or "Mr. Nilson."

Thirteen individuals hired from the relief rolls of Stearns County wrote the biographical sketches: Nine men and four women. Sixty-two percent of the people interviewed were men, according to the name in the headings, and thirty-eight percent were women. However, these statistics are misleading. Sometimes women were interviewed on the same sketch after the men and the man's name appeared
at the heading and in the file number. Furthermore, when women were inter-
viewed, often their father or husband's name appeared at the heading. The
woman's name was at the close of the sketch. The same held true if men talked
about their fathers, but this was less often. It was often difficult to know
whether the interviewee was reminiscing about him/her self or about some-
one else. Few women talked about themselves.

The following people conducted the interviews:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Dean Nelson</td>
<td>1. Ann Kramer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Walter Jernberg</td>
<td>2. Dorothy Hansmann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Clarence Chisholm</td>
<td>3. Melba Peterson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Gilbert Bunt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Virgil Chirhart</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Alexander Pollanch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. N.P. Kruchten</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Oliver Myhre</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviews Conducted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Man Conducted Interview</th>
<th>Woman Conducted Interview</th>
<th>Man Interviewed</th>
<th>Woman Interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>263 - 58%</td>
<td>190 - 42%</td>
<td>283 - 62%</td>
<td>170 - 38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although these statistics are interesting, they cannot be taken literally
because I was unable to find out why nine men conducted 58% of the interviews
and four women conducted 42% of the interviews.
**GRAPH I**

Where were individuals interviewed born?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth Place</th>
<th>Minnesota</th>
<th>Other States in U.S.</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>England &amp; Canada</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>Ireland</th>
<th>Switzerland</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group I</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group II</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group III</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group IV</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1-Russia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>453</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

112 out of 453, or 25%, of those interviewed lived in other states before coming to Minnesota.

170 were born in America - 38%; 283 were foreign born - 62%; 20% were born in Minnesota.

**GRAPH II**

Where were individuals interviewed born? Percentages.

- Minnesota: 20%
- Other States in U.S.: 18%
- Germany: 35%
- England & Canada: 7%
- Norway: 13%
- Denmark: 4%
- Ireland: 1 individual
- Switzerland: 4%
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Farming</th>
<th>Shelters</th>
<th>Indians</th>
<th>Railroads</th>
<th>Trip to Minnesota</th>
<th>Military</th>
<th>Natural Disasters</th>
<th>More than one occupation</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group I</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group II</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group III</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group IV</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After I had completed the quantitative study, I scanned each of the 1529 sketches for examples and relevant information to verify my findings. Then I took special note of information relating to agriculture and farming in Stearns County as a case study.

Each sketch has a file number in the right hand corner. This is the number I used to refer to specific sketches. These numbers are in chronological order and the names in the headings are in alphabetical order in the files. The files are contained in nine hollinger boxes in St. Cloud State University Learning Resources Center in the Central Minnesota Historical Center.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GRAPH V</th>
<th>Percentages of what individuals interviewed talked about</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>9% 9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>25% 25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelters</td>
<td>10% 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indians</td>
<td>21% 21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Railroads</td>
<td>9% 9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trip To Minnesota</td>
<td>12% 12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military</td>
<td>15% 15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Disasters</td>
<td>6% 6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>29% 29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>34% 34%</td>
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</tbody>
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Education:

Education topped the list of topics discussed in the sketches. Very possibly the interviewee was asked what his/her educational background was, but this is not certain. Even so, the fact that 34 percent of the sketches mentioned education indicates that education was important to the people of Stearns County at this period of history.

Mrs. Arminta Mumford (B-935) said that even as a widow she made sure her children had an education. "Education always pays, even when you have to go hungry to give it to your children. It is something no one can take away from them in any way." Many of the interviewees listed what schools they attended, both in their mother country if they were immigrants, and in America. Teachers were often named and seemed to command a lot of respect. William F.E. Schroeder (B-1193) talked about the requirements for someone to teach in Stearns County.

Most talked favorably about education in early Stearns County. Mrs. Mary (Kremer) Hemberger (B-536) said she "believes that they learned more than they do now days, because children would rather study their books than work hard in the fields." Many told of attending public schools, Normal school, taking extension courses, and John Zimmerman (B-1524) said "children for a radius of five miles attended schools." The distance a six year old child could walk determined the location of rural schools.

On the other hand, others said they could not attend school at all or very little because they were needed to help work and support the family. Henry Pramann (B-1056) said much of his time as a child was spent doing hard work because the cooperation of the entire family was necessary to make their farm productive. I sensed a feeling of regret in this type of statement. Many said they would have liked to go to school more.
Occupation:

From the outset, "Occupation" proved infeasible. Many of the people interviewed talked about their ancestors, not themselves, and others did not denote occupation at all. I decided to make this category "more than one occupation."

Twenty-nine percent listed more than one occupation. Some were: Stone cutter, basket weaver, brewery worker, carpenter, wagoner, teamster, teacher, railroad worker, laborer, carriage factory worker, musician, merchantile trade, farmer -- to mention a few. Forest Ball (B-51) is a fine example of many occupations. His sketch lists his numerous accomplishments in various trades. He ends by saying he had "grown up with the city" of St. Cloud. Mary (Miller) Bauer (B-75) gives a detailed account of her father's cigar-making business after he had been a musician and a plasterer. Dennis Hanlon (B-488) says he worked a "odd" jobs for years before he opened his own refreshment parlor in St. Cloud.

Wolfgang Voit (B-1388) gives some insight into the reasons for so many occupational changes in a lifetime. He says he had no money for farm equipment, his chosen profession was to farm, so he worked at the copper trade in St. Joe to earn money until he could afford to farm. John Ziegler (B-1519) says in 1883 he was a miller by trade but "during this period there was considerable building going on so John changed occupations and became a carpenter." William Wieber (B-1467), gives a vivid description of traveling agents who stayed at his hotel in Richmond. Many of the farmers merely say that they built a log cabin and with a yoke of oxen began to farm the land. Then they worked as wood cutters or draymen in winter and often builders in summer in spare time to earn cash money. Women seldom listed their occupations.
Indians:

Indians were mentioned in 21 percent of the sketches. This proved to be intriguing because if Indians were mentioned at all, often details and long stories were related. Some sketches contain three or more pages of Indian "stories." The attitude toward Indians was interesting. They were thought of either as savages or children: Fear or awe. Mrs. Knott (B-710) bitterly describes the horrors inflicted on white settlers by Indians. Women were always afraid of the Indians. Margaret McManus (B-847), said, "I rode as fast as possible toward home, frightened me wings." Not one sketch tells of men being frightened of Indians. Many talk about Indians coming into early homes and helping themselves to food while the women shivered in a corner. Chan Harmon (B-500), however, narrates an unjudgemental picture of the Indian lifestyle.

Moreover, individuals like Peter R. Weinhaus (B-1432), says "...the winters were severely cold and the snow very deep, without the help of the Indians they would have starved. The Indians used to bring animal skins and wild game of all kinds."

I sensed a condescending attitude toward the Indians. Often they were described as mindless creatures who helped themselves to booty. They were called red skins, savages, half-breeds, breeds, squaws --never people.  

Military:

Military was mentioned in 15 percent of the sketches. This was either in reference to military duty in the mother country, in the Civil War, against the Indians, or in World War I. Matthew Hennen (B-546), typical of many sketches, says when he reached the age of eighteen years, he left Germany to avoid military service in the German Army. Randolph Holding (B-575), served in the Eighth
Minnesota Regiment in the Civil War. Samuel Holes (B-577) made bullets by hammering lead to protect the settlers from the Indians. Many of the sketches of Richmond and Sauk Centre area residents tell of the Indian stockades and the soldiers that fought against the Indians in Stearns County, aiding the settlers. Louis Jackson (B-610) gives details of a "Victory Medal" awarded to his son in World War I, with details of how he won it. I noted an attitude of horror against serving in the military in Europe but one of pride in serving in America.

Trip to Minnesota:

Trip to Minnesota puzzled me. I expected it to be particularized more often than it was. Mentioned in only 12 percent of the sketches, many say merely that the trip to America was made in a sailing vessel and the journey lasted a certain length of time. Some like Mary Bauer Miller (B-75) give reasons why ancestors emigrated and Levi Welher Smith (B-1250), when asked why he left New York for Minnesota simply said, "I guess I took a notion just like the rest of them."

Katherine (Caspers) Kemper (B-661) does give details of problems with obtaining tickets, some details of her three month trip on the ocean, and of her difficulties in America before reaching Minnesota.

I determined that if settlers came from another state to Minnesota they brought supplies with them, whereas, most immigrants came to Minnesota with very few belongings. John Fred William Arndt (B-31) tells of coming from Wisconsin bringing household goods and a supply of provisions and farm implements to begin farming. Many of the immigrants had to work at odd trades in America to earn cash money to buy supplies and provisions to begin farming.

A most interesting sketch, William F.E Schroeder (B-1193), describes how bread was allowed to raise all day on a shelf in the rear of a wagon and then
baked when camp was made at night.

**Shelters:**

I selected shelters as a topic because I wanted to relate it to farming and discover what shelters the early pioneers built and lived in, how they built them, and certainly, what went on inside them. Only 10 percent of the sketches mentioned any type of shelter. Many described what the early shelters were constructed of. For example, John C. Veeder (B-1384), said their first "shanty had no shingles and it was plastered with mud and moss which always blew out in a highwind." John C. Noll (B-968) for his first home said they "cut trees and set them in ground at an angle, tied them together on top and piled hay and brush around them." They lived in this until fall. Mary Wieble Staples Mund (B-937) says they built a house of stone carried from the prairie and Indians helped them carry the stones in exchange for food. Charles A. Kennedy (B-663), compares sod shanties to chicken barns. George Mock (B-911) and his neighbors erected five log shanties, one on each claim, working as a group helping each other out with "cabin raisings."

Women were often acknowledged in relation to shelters. John Peschek (B-1030) gives a marvelous description of cupboards, furniture, and how they were built. He describes cooking utensils, lighting methods, games played, and other family life that went on inside the early log cabins. Peter Kramer (B-732) tells about his wife making furniture and "all the shingles for their log cabin." And Margaret (Kronenberg) Pramann (B-1056) said her mother sold eggs and butter in town for things needed in the house.

**Railroads:**

Railroads were not often commented on in detail. Mentioned in only 9 percent of the sketches, little information was garnered about them. Anna
(Jamtvold) Evavold Henningsgard (B-548) gives a description of her plight in a New York rail depot as a single parent trying to exchange her Norwegian money to American money in order to board the train. Most of the references to railroads were in some aspect of working on them. John S. Holms (B-580) was employed by the Great Northern Railway Company until 1927 when he retired. August Jackson (B-609) constructed railroad grades when he worked as a contractor for the railway company. Mathias Jacobs (B-612) worked as a car repair man on the Great Northern Railroad. Levi Welher Smith (B-1250) said rail lines were completed by 1878 as far as Sauk Centre so "the people no longer had to make the long trip from Sauk Centre to St. Cloud for supplies." A few farmers mentioned that the rails were necessary for hauling products to market after the initial settlement period, when farmers were raising more than they needed for themselves.

Religion:

This topic surprised me more than any other. I found very little mention of religion. Few sketches even denoted religious affiliation of the individual interviewed. In a heavily German Catholic county, I expected religion to be more important, if my hypothesis is feasible about the amount of times a topic is mentioned. Religion was mentioned in only 9 percent of the sketches, very seldom in detail. Statements like one made by John Schwinghamer Jr. (B-1209), were most frequent: "The first Mass to be held in Two Rivers Settlement was read by Father Wolfgang Northam O.S.B. on Ascension Day in the year 1866, in the log cabin home of John Schwinghamer." However, John Zimmerman (B-1524), did say churches were among the first buildings erected in early towns, along with hotels, schools, stores, saloons, and blacksmith shops. Adam Junior Keppers (B-667), describes the interior of a school/church combination structure
with a blackboard on one end of the room and an altar on the other.

One of the few noteworthy comments concerning religion came as an interesting feminists' commentary. Anna (Hewitt) Smith (B-1274) said it was an early custom in her church that women sit on one side and the men on the other. She tells of a female relative who proudly sat beside her man in the men's section and "from then on the congregation sat where they wanted to." This was in an early Congregational Church in Sauk Centre.

Natural Disasters:

Because historical novels rely quite heavily on natural disasters in story lines to add drama and excitement, I expected the sketches to give many details; I expected treatises about the plight of individuals during natural disasters. To my surprise, natural disasters were mentioned in only 6 percent of the sketches. And I looked for any type of natural disaster. The grasshopper plague that devastated crops all over the Northwest between the years 1872 - 1876 was alluded to more often than other natural phenomenon. Rudolph Schallert (B-1164) gives the best description of their destruction in Stearns County. Kenna Fredricks (B-662) describes it some extent, and Arthur Richter (B-1104), said "The government furnished the settlers with tar and tin contraptions to catch the hoppers but although thousands were caught that way it met with little success." I had not known that the government had helped the farmers in this manner.

A cyclone that ripped through Stearns County in 1888 was noted a few times. It caused considerable property damage and loss of life. Benedict D. Laudenback (B-772) said "The following morning he helped pick up the dead in and near Sauk Rapids. There were six inches of water on the ground."

A flood occurred in 1876 that Anna Hewitt Smith, (B-1247), says caused
lumber to be washed from Sauk Centre downriver to Melrose where it was recovered after the flood.

Peter Ruegamer (B-1131) tells of stage travel during a snowstorm and LeRoy Working (B-1072) describes a three day blizzard that ruined his fall threshing because it occurred in October, 1936. He narrates that "when the swirling snow had ceased to fall a large white mound stood where the thresher was buried."

Peter Rander (B-1072) mentions army worms so thick one year that rail lines were destroyed causing trains to stop running until the worms could be eradicated.

Conclusion

This study was a personal study based on my own background and prejudices. It is designed to give some insight into what the WPA sketches might reveal about various subjects. My references to particular sketches might be used as springboards to lure an interested reader to delve further into the sketches. For an extensive study, I believe, all of the sketches should be scanned. This is exactly what I did with agriculture as a case study.
Agriculture: A Case Study

Agriculture, farming, or references to husbandry occurred in 25 percent of the WPA sketches. Some of the individuals interviewed said little more than that they came to Stearns County, built a log cabin, broke some land, and engaged in general farming. Others gave detailed information about crops, shelters, tools and implements, work and play, women, and lifestyles of the early farming settlers.

From the sketches I was able to piece together a brief picture of the early farmers and how they lived in Stearns County.

The pioneers who came to Stearns County to farm came from western Europe or from the eastern or southern United States. If they came from Europe, they brought very few supplies or provisions with them; often only the clothes on their backs. Sometimes the men of the families found employment wherever they could to earn cash money with which to buy farming implements and tools. Those who came from other parts of the United States, generally, brought these things with them.

Many times men came to Stearns County alone to locate claims and build shelters. Then they either returned to their homes and traveled with their families to Stearns County or they sent for their families. This accounts for many of the women who traveled as single parents. Some women, however, came without men by choice. It was legal for women to file claims under their own names.

Upon locating a claim, a shelter had to be constructed. Often temporary shelters sufficed the first summer. This might have been a sod shanty in the prairie regions of Stearns County or a pole shelter covered with hay in a wooded region.
In the prairie regions of Stearns County, the pioneers could begin breaking land and planting crops but in the wooded areas, most of Stearns County, trees had to be felled and removed first. Those trees that could be used as timbers for a log cabin or barn were hewed with an adze or a broad axe, notched at the corners for proper fit, and numbered and left until there were enough for an entire structure, usually in fall after the harvest. For a cabin or barn raising, the entire family helped and often neighbors came. After the structure was up, a roof of home-made wooden shingles finished off the outside and mud, clay, hay, grass, or straw was chinked between the logs. The inside walls were white-washed and instead of glass for windows, tallow covered paper was used. If there was a floor, it was made of rough sawn lumber or logs. Cupboards were made, often by women, by pounding pegs into the logs and placing clapboards across them. Beds were built of four blocks of wood with poles across them and then covered with straw. Chairs were round blocks of wood. Tables were larger blocks of wood, sometimes with clapboard across them.

For many settlers only enough trees were cleared the first season to plant a small amount of wheat, some rutabagas and pumpkins, maybe some potatoes, and a little corn, all sown by hand and covered with a drag—a V-shaped implement made to break up the soil lumps and cover the seed at the same time. This was pulled between the stumps as the stumps were left rooted like flat chairs between the green plants until fall or spring when they were grubbed out with the aid of a grub axe and a powerful ox.

Oxen were used as draft animals by the early settlers. They were slow and plodding but strong, gentle, reliable, and they required little feed beyond grass or hay. They could be left to graze in near-by woods when the days work came to a close. Oxen could be yoked to a walking plow or other hand-made machinery and
because of their gentle strength they did not break the wooden parts, yet they were steady, sure-footed, and had great power.

Early crops were harvested with crude tools and implements. Hay and grass were cut with a scythe, a long, curved, single-edged blade with a long bent handle. Potatoes were dug by hand with a wooden fork. Pumpkins, rutabagas, turnips, and other large vegetables were hauled to a shelter or onto piles with flat boards pulled by the oxen. Wheat was cut with a cradle, a tool similar to a scythe but with four or five prongs that caught and laid the grain in a straight row. The grain was tied in bundles by hand with twine, wire, or twisted strands of grain and set in shocks to dry until it could be stacked to await threshing. Threshing was done by pounding out the grain with large sticks, later threshing machines were used, and also reapers and harvesters. Reapers had a circle-shaped platform and a sickle. There were five rakes that ran on a circle and served as a reel. These rakes pushed the grain against the sickle which cut the grain and it was pushed onto a platform from where it fell to the ground. With a Marsh harvester, a person could stand on the platform and tie the grain in bundles while it was in motion. Men usually did the heavy work and operated the tools and machines. Women and children tied the grain, shocked it, and stacked it. Many times meals were served in the harvest fields and eaten in the shade of a hay-stack or grain stack.

Threshing was done in the early days with a flail, a long wooden handle with a shorter, free-swinging stick attached to it. This was flung against the grain to separate the grain from the straw. Or, bundles were placed on a hard, clean section of ground and then oxen were driven around on it trampling out the grain. Then it was shoveled into a home-made fanning mill to separate the chaff from the seed; sometimes it was dumped into baskets and blown out or held out
in a gentle breeze. The straw was used for bedding for the cattle.

Hay was wild and grew in low areas. Sometimes it was cut while standing in water and carried to higher ground to dry for storage. Hay was the primary feed for livestock. Rutabagas and pumpkins and turnips were cooked into a mash and fed to cattle and pigs. In the early days corn was grown only for family use as it did not ripen enough to dry for cattle or hog feed.

Women were often left alone on the early farms while the men cut wood for home use or to sell as cord wood in local towns, while the men were out in the fields or at a neighbors helping with their harvesting, while the men were gone to town to sell crops or to buy supplies, and often the men worked on the railroads or at other "odd" jobs to earn cash money with which to purchase supplies and tools and implements and pay the taxes. At times like this, often months at a time, women had to assume the entire operation of the farm as well as care for the home and children. This happened in Stearns County to a great number of farm families in 1872 to 1876 when the grasshopper plague devasted entire crops. The men had to find other sources of income if they were to continue farming. Fortunately, the years immediately following the grasshopper plagues yielded the most abundant crops ever and shortly after those terrible years the farmers that stayed and perservered were able to make improvements and purchase the tools and implements that made their lives somewhat easier.

Early wagons were built by cutting discs from large trees for wheels. Iron tools such as axes, hoes, plow lays, and even cooking utensils were fashioned by local blacksmiths. Handles, plow beams, shovels, and ox yokes were made entirely from trees cut and shaped and smoothed until they fit their purpose. Harnesses were made from buffalo hides or hickory twigs and willows. Early drags, or harrows, cultivators, and also some plows were made entirely of wood.
Wood seemed to be a never-ending resource in Stearns County. It was used in every aspect of early life. Whatever was not used on the farm, sold as cord wood, as railroad ties, or as lumber was piled up and burned to make way for more crop land and roads.

Early roads were cartways through the woods. Stumps protruded in many places along the way and an axe had to be carried when the settlers traveled these trails because trees would fall across the paths. In winter sleds were used and could often go over the stumps. Corduroy roads were improvised, logs laid side by side, to cross swamps and streams.

Mosquitos and insects were large and abundant. Smudges were made for respite but generally they had to be endured. Often the ceiling in a log cabin was black with flies by evening. At milking time girls stood behind the cattle with willow switches to shoo off the mosquitos and flies that affected the cattle and horses as much as the people.

Children helped with most of the farm work. They helped with the care and feeding of livestock. They gathered wood and brush to be used as firewood in the house. They helped with the harvest by doing the easier work such as shocking grain, raking hay, or bringing lunch out into the fields for other workers. They rounded up the cattle at milking time and helped with the household chores. There was a definite division of labor regarding children. The boys helped their fathers and the girls helped their mothers.

Women helped in the fields and they cared for the animals, the home, and the children. Housework never ended. It was dull and monotonous, like the food. Coffee was made from roasted barley or toasted peas or even tree bark. Flour was ground from wheat or corn between two stones or in a coffee mill and made into Johnny Cake or bread. Jelly made from fruits and berries was considered a dessert. Wild game, fish, berries, and greens were obtained from the woods.
If the farmer had a cow, milk, butter, and cheese were plentiful in summer, but in winter when the cattle stopped giving milk because they were not fed properly, water had to replace milk in the diet. Water was brought into the house in buckets filled at the well, often dug by hand and a distance from the house so it was also convenient for the livestock.

Utensils for cooking over an open fire at first and later on a cookstove were large iron kettles, long handled skillets with covers, a cast-iron tea kettle for heating water, a coffee pot, wooden bowls, and dishes. Light was provided by rutabaga hollowed out with a strip of rag for a wick and bear grease or tallow for fuel. Later home-made candles were used and lanterns.

Clothes in the early days were scarce and simply made from muslin. Heavy work clothes for the men were purchased in local stores. In summer everyone went barefooted. In winter wooden shoes were made; sometimes leather shoes made from hides of cattle or deer soaked in oil.

Children went to school if they were not needed for work at home. Families attended church services together if it was convenient, often only the men attended and the women cooked meals. Earliest services were held in large homes. For fun and recreation, families visited each other. They played musical instruments and danced and ate lunch. A few times a year the whole family would drive into town to trade home-made and home-grown items for supplies and provisions for the family and home and farm. They would stop along the way and visit friends and relatives. The parents rode on wagon seats and the children were piled on the back, often on blankets and pillows so they could sleep along the way.

The early pioneers who settled in Stearns County to farm plowed their land, sowed their fields, fenced their livestock, dug ditches to drain land for crops, and successfully carved out a living that has endured to the present. As William Smith O'Brien Jr. (B-976) said, people were used to 'depressed' times and thought
nothing of it — just took it all calmly in the day's stride. They didn't bemoan their fate but went out and did something about it!

Conclusion

The foregoing history is not a comprehensive history of Stearns County. It was based entirely on information I obtained from the WPA biographical sketches. I did not embellish the language or descriptions they provided and I did not add information from other sources.

My point was to prove that the biographical sketches were valuable beyond genealogical data. I believe I did this with my case study of agriculture. Much of the information I could not find in any other sources. In a more broad study of agriculture, this information is invaluable.

Research such as my study of the WPA sketches is tedious and time-consuming but necessary if primary source material is to be consulted. Furthermore, I feel the WPA Writers' Project was a good project. It did provide the American public with historical research material that gives us an insight into America that we would not otherwise have. The nation's culture was enhanced by the socio-ethnic literature that evolved out of the WPA.

And, the farmers of Stearns County did find their lives important enough to talk about them.
NOTES

The WPA:


"Work Projects Administration (WPA)," Encyclopedia Americana, 1967.


"Work Projects Administration (WPA)."

5. Mangione, p. 373.

6. "Work Projects Administration (WPA)."

The FWP and The WP:


Mangione, p. 49. Mangione deals primarily with the professional and creative writers on the project. Possibly my attitude in this paper reflects this. Unfortunately, there is little written about the historical aspect of the project. At the SCSU library I couldn't find much at all.


5. Mangione, p. 373.

6. Mangione, p. 115-116. Other poems and descriptions are in the book but I felt Norris' was most revealing and emotional.

7. Mangione, p. 49. I am referring back to the quote on page 1 of this chapter to point out that I feel poems like Norris' accomplished what the professional writers had wanted in the first place.


Stearns County WPA and WP:

1."Stearns County Minnesota WPA Biographical Sketches," A one page introduction to the files. Found in box 1 of the collection at the CMHC.


4.In order for individuals to obtain Social Security at age 65 without a legal birth certificate, they could go to the church where they were baptised and use the baptismal certificate as legal proof of birthdate. My father was one of these people. He said the St. Martin town clerk should have recorded and sent births to the county court house. He never sent them in and eventually they were lost.

5.For purposes of simplification, I will not footnote each sketch quoted and/or paraphrased. I will denote the name at the head of the file and the file number of the sketch right in the text.

6.Personally, I didn't find my family in the sketches. I did find my mother's aunt under her married name, which I hadn't known, and found genealogical information that helped me in my family history.

7.I realized some time after I was into this paper that there were a number of other topics I should/could have selected. One of these was the granite industry. Stearns County is famous for its granite and many of the sketches list some type of involvement with stone and granite. A few individuals indicated that they had learned stone cutting or a similar occupation in Germany and came to Stearns County for this reason. This could be another study.
7 June D. Holmquist, ed., They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1981). This is an up-to-date study of ethnic groups in Minnesota with charts and statistics that are excellent.

8 An interesting study would be to compare this data with date a decade or so later to see if people continued to move. Did the residents of Stearns County move after the Depression or did the Depression make roots more important?

9 This is a value judgement concerning the Indians. I felt the same attitude when I read the Mitchell history of Stearns County, published in 1915. It is my feeling that this was the prevailing attitude at this time in history. I noted most that the Indians were almost never referred to as people but as savages, or red skins. Native Americans was a term probably unheard of at this time. For this reason I refer to them as Indians throughout this compilation of reports.

I took the liberty of making other value judgements throughout this paper. I believe this is acceptable because this is, after all, a personal analysis of the WPA sketches.
Bibliography


"Work Projects Administration (WPA)." Encyclopedia Americana, 1967.